

OXFORD
SHORT STORIES

*First published in 1919
by the Falcon Press (London) Limited
6 and 7 Crown Passage, Pall Mall, London S.W.1
Printed in Great Britain
by W. Taylor & Co. Limited,
London
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AUSTRALIA

*The Invincible Press
Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide*

NEW ZEALAND

The Invincible Press, Wellington

CANADA

The Falcon Press (London) Ltd., Toronto

SOUTH AFRICA

M. Darling (Pty.) Ltd., Cape Town

Oxford

SHORT STORIES

edited
with an introduction
by
DEREK PATMORE

London
THE FALCON PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

OXFORD. The name still carries a legendary magic to the rest of the world. Whenever I visit the city, and I have been there frequently since the war, I am struck by the subtle contrast of the buildings in the Broad and by the fine sweep of the High as it leads to Magdalen Bridge—the baroque splendour of Queen's College blends so harmoniously with the earlier style of Magdalen. On a sunny day a luminous magic does seem to hang over the whole scene.

No matter if the university town no longer has its former calm and is being invaded by the neighbouring industrialism; if its colleges are overcrowded and 'digs' are difficult to find and food is scarce, it still retains an unique quality. For Oxford remains a world apart. This is the place that once harboured the rebellious young Shelley, the youthful Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde, many of the Pre-Raphaelites, Walter Pater, and a legion of other famous men.

Always more romantic in spirit than its sister university, Cambridge, it has also shown an adventurous

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spirit in matters of the mind. It has long given a lead to new literary and artistic trends and it has often been the home of lost causes. Paradoxically, this most ancient city, although it creates an illusion of security and indestructibility, has ever been in the forefront with new ideas and the launching of new intellectual or religious movements.

The idea of forming this collection of short stories, written by undergraduates up at post-war Oxford, first came to me when I was staying there during the summer term finishing a book. I had been fortunate in getting a room in an old house in Banbury Road. The other inmates were all undergraduates, and whilst I was living there I was inevitably drawn into their everyday life. Young men would burst into my room to have a talk or to ask me to go on the river. There would be long discussions in one of their rooms after dinner, when the topics ranged from religion to the difficulties of a first love affair. I was back in the world of undergraduates—some of them still in the early twenties, others young veterans from the Services.

Living this life, it occurred to me that it would be interesting to try to make an estimate of the mentality and ideas of this post-war generation. I began to collect material for this anthology of the new writing being done at the university.

Of course, it would be foolish to think that the literary work of a small group of Oxford intellectuals necessarily reflects the feelings of the whole university. But, in selecting these short stories, I have tried to choose them from various groups and not only from one set of writers. Indeed, many of the young writers represented in this anthology do not even know each other. This collection does not represent any small literary clique. Rather, I have attempted to give a cross-

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section of the post-war Oxford mentality, and certain of the stories have been deliberately chosen to emphasise a special point of view.

I think that many readers may be surprised by these short stories. There is an idea still abroad that undergraduates are usually carefree, gay-hearted creatures incapable of deep feelings or of producing serious writing. This idea lingers in the mind because of a long tradition, and partly because the writings of men like Sir Max Beerbohm have painted such a sparkling picture of past undergraduate life. Oxford was like that once. But these stories in their varying and often bitter moods show that the era of Zuleika Dobson has passed away for ever.

After the First World War, Oxford was invaded by a number of ex-service undergraduates. Amongst these were men such as T. E. Lawrence, Robert Graves, and Charles Morgan. They, and others of their generation, all thought that they had fought a war to end all wars and now sought to start a new life in the quiet atmosphere of the university city. Embittered by the recent war, they yet had a certain assurance about them, and the three writers mentioned were confident of their own abilities. Colonel Lawrence's residence as a Fellow of All Souls still remains a legend in Oxford. He undoubtedly enjoyed the college life and it quieted his restless spirit, and Robert Graves recalls how he would order out the college gold plate when distinguished American visitors came to see Lawrence and the pleasure that he took in the specially brewed college ale.

Now, following the Second World War, Oxford has again become the asylum of a great number of ex-Service men; but few of these have either the glamour or the assurance of a T. E. Lawrence. Instead, these new ex-service men have little confidence and even less faith

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in the future. For most of them, World War Number Two was neither a war to end all wars nor the prelude to a bright new world. Rather, it was a blunder committed by their elders and one which they felt they had to endure and fight for whether they believed in it or not. These men are often bitter, disillusioned, and vainly seeking for some solution to present-day problems. But it would be a mistake to think that the writers amongst these young men have given up hope. Many of them are deeply preoccupied with the urgency of the problems facing mankind, and present-day Oxford is full of various societies and groups whose main idea is to discover some way out of our contemporary evils.

It is significant that very few of the intellectual undergraduates are Communists. It was otherwise in the past. Then, Communism used to gain its most ardent recruits amongst the more idealistic youth. Today, Oxford seems to be experiencing a general disillusionment with politics, and the more serious-minded are turning to mysticism and religion. The teachings of the Eastern mystics, in particular, exercise a special fascination for some of these students, and I have met several who are contemplating following the example of Larry Durrell, the hero of Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* and seeking salvation in the mystic teachings of India. Others have found consolation in the subtle but comprehensive doctrines of Roman Catholicism. On the other hand, there are a number of agnostics, and a few who seem to be attracted by the doctrines of violence.

Most of the writers in this anthology are ex-Service men. Their war experience has given some of them a maturity unexpected in an undergraduate writer. At the same time, the knowledge of death and pain has had

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an unsettling effect on the more sensitive of them, many of whom now seek refuge in a world of imagination and escape. But I think that many readers will be struck by the fact that violence and suffering obsess a number of these young writers.

You cannot train young men as Commandos or teach them to bomb cities without it leaving some stain on their minds. It is difficult for such men to fit into the orderly pattern of Oxford life, and a number of them have told me that they find it very difficult to settle down. They may be soothed by the beauty of the old city with its buildings and towers outlined against a clear sky on a moonlight night. They may find temporary oblivion in lazy picnics on the river or in casual gatherings in some college room. But memories of the Burmese jungles, campaigns in the Middle East or France still haunt their subconscious minds.

I am told that this collection is the first attempt to edit a collection of short stories by undergraduate writers up at Oxford. Even so, it would be unfair to judge all these stories by too high a standard. A number of them are worthy of study more for what they promise in the future than for what they actually accomplish. How many writers at the age of twenty-three are complete masters of their craft? However, several of the writers included in this book have already begun to make their mark in the contemporary literary field. Francis King has published three novels and certain competent critics consider him to be one of the most interesting of the younger novelists. Ludovic Kennedy, who served with the Royal Navy during the war, wrote a best seller during that time and he is now back at Oxford taking a course in English literature. John Watney, too, has achieved success as a novelist.

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Amongst the other writers, I predict that more will be heard of Alan R. Beesley, Derek Lindsay, Desmond Stewart, and Hugo Charteris. All these authors have already had stories published in various collections and magazines, and each in their different ways reflect a side of contemporary Oxford. The disappointed romantic is well to the fore in Desmond Stewart's *Blue For You, Johnnie*. This witty and cruel story about life in modern Rome is one of the longest in the anthology, but I think it deserves its place as it is undoubtedly one of the most finished works in the whole collection. A more sombre talent is displayed in Hugo Charteris's *Liberation In Bali*, a tale about post-war conditions in that island. The author was in Bali during his service in the Far East as a Public Relations Officer.

Intellectual circles in Oxford maintain that Alan R. Beesley and Derek Lindsay were probably the two most gifted short-story writers up at the university at their time, and they are both frequent contributors to the university magazines. Alan R. Beesley, who served in the R.A.F., visited the United States during the war and his *Pink Slippers* is a vivid, starkly-written story about a young Englishman's impressions of America, and particularly his reactions to witnessing the lynching of a negro. Derek Lindsay, who served in the Army, plunges us on the other hand into a nightmare world of fantasy.

Lindsay, like so many of his contemporaries, is horrified by conditions in the modern world, and in his stories he seeks to point parables by disguising them as fantasies. But these fantastic tales are all the more alarming as they are based on actual conditions. This young writer had an Italian mother and this may account for the power and imagination displayed in his *The Unknown Land*, which I find one of the most

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interesting and at the same time one of the most disturbing stories in this book. Lindsay offers the reader little hope about the future; rather, he sees mankind surging towards ultimate destruction in a manner as terrifying as any depicted either by Dante or Edgar Allan Poe. There is no salvation in the fantastic world depicted by Derek Lindsay. He sees mankind as infinitely mean, cruel, self-destructive and pathetically stupid. The fact that the stories by this author are much admired in contemporary Oxford is not without its significance.

It might have been expected that masters of the modern short story, such as Ernest Hemingway and Somerset Maugham, would have exercised an influence over these new writers, but I can find few traces of it in the work presented in this volume. On the other hand, a story like Patrick Gardiner's *Light and Air* owes a definite debt to D. H. Lawrence. Indeed, this author appears to be enjoying quite a revival amongst the younger generation. Echoes of Lawrence are also apparent in George Scott's *A Sneer Is Mortal*.

Reading through these stories, I have noticed that resignation seems to have taken the place of that indignation with contemporary conditions which was such a feature of writing after the First World War. The savage attacks on English life which made novels like *Death of a Hero* such challenging reading are entirely absent. Instead, there is an inclination to accept life as the sad business it has now become. Even a story like Michael Croft's *Nova-Scotian Water-front*, although written in the modern stream-of-consciousness style, is romantic in its evocation of a fugitive war-time friendship.

Perhaps it is unwise to try to read too much psychology into the work of these young men. After

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all, writers change, and Oxford for many of these writers is merely a period of transition—a settling down to life after the disrupting experiences of war. But I was surprised, whilst collecting material for this anthology, to discover how many men up at Oxford were writing short stories. Over one hundred were submitted to me before I made this final selection. Considering that most of these writers were also studying hard for degrees and a few like Miles Vaughan Williams were actively doing another job, and as there is so little encouragement for the young writer today I found this number remarkable.

The critics and the reading public are frequently asking: 'Who are the new writers?' This book presents the work of fifteen young writers—men who are studying in the city that has produced so many of the great English authors of the past—and I congratulate the publishers on their initiative in giving them a chance. One of the tragedies of the present period is that few publishers can risk their limited amount of paper in publishing the work of new and unknown authors. This situation makes it extremely difficult for a young writer with genuine literary talent to present his work to the reading public, and if it is allowed to continue may have a serious effect on the future of English literature. So far the State has done little to encourage creative writing and one has only to look back to the nineteenth century to see how times have changed.

The Victorian era, so mocked at and despised some twenty years ago, now appears as a happy period for writers. The age of private patronage of the arts still persisted and we find that many young gifted writers and poets were found sinecures in Civil Service jobs, such as that of Assistant in the British Museum, or

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Librarian to the House of Lords. Tennyson might not have written some of his finest poems if he had not been granted a Civil Pension at a comparatively early age, and even publishers were willing to give what now appear great sums for a novel—Disraeli received an advance of ten thousand pounds for one of his novels.

It is true that a few of the Oxford writers included in this book have War Office grants to complete their studies at the university, but the pressure of lectures and the studying for exams leaves them little free time for writing. Still, the youth of this country continues to be attracted by the career of literature. Because of this, I feel that these Oxford short stories deserve a sympathetic welcome.

These stories, although written by men up at Oxford, do not contain any story about life in the university. I discussed this fact with several of the authors whose work I have chosen for this anthology, and asked them why they had not written about their present background. Their replies varied. One told me that he found that the somewhat artificial atmosphere of undergraduate life did not inspire him and that he preferred to write about subjects with a more adult interest. Another informed me that he had tried to write about Oxford life, but had found the subject eluded him. As he said: 'There's something unreal about Oxford. Perhaps that's its charm; undergraduate conversation sounds amusing when you listen to it in a room or at a party, but it looks artificial when you set it down on paper. Oxford's a good place for study and I like working here. But I find social life very limited and boring after my war experiences.'

Maybe, Oxford life can only be treated in the Max Beerbohm manner or in the light-hearted way that Beverley Nichols treated it in *Patchwork*, but I think

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that even these authors would be hard put to it in trying to write about present post-war Oxford in this manner. As I have said before, the days when life at the university was a pleasant round of meetings in college rooms, elaborate dinners where the guests endeavoured to copy the example of witty conversation started by Oscar Wilde, and revived by a later generation under Harold Acton, are over. Then, existence seemed to be a happy round of parties and the time to make friends. Today, Oxford life is very earnest. Most undergraduates are worrying about getting their degrees. They have little time for leisure or amusements. Moreover, food is scarce and therefore luncheon or dinner parties in college are out of the question. Also, the difference in mentality between the ex-service men and those who have just come up to the university from school makes the social life more difficult. Even many of the dons are frightened of these young war veterans.

Oxford, like the rest of Great Britain, is passing through a period of transition, and some of these stories reflect the unease that such a period of unrest and change causes in a tradition-bound city like this old university. For a sense of unease exists under the outward calm of Oxford. There is the problem of the returning ex-service men. There is the problem of the future—few undergraduates have any sense of stability and fear either another war or drastic social upheavals.

In the United States, the younger professors at the leading universities spend a great deal of their spare time with the undergraduates and this enables them to help and understand the many problems that face any young man. At Oxford the young don who mingles freely with the undergraduates is a rarity and if he attempts to do so he is considered eccentric by his

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colleagues. This seems a pity as undoubtedly many of the more brilliant of the dons could do much to help the puzzled and often lost generation at present studying at the university. It was the Greek idea that experienced, older men could help the young, and surely this should remain one of the basic aims of all education.

It must be admitted, in defence of the dons, that post-war Oxford leaves them little time for any social intercourse. The majority of them have more students than ever before and their term-time life is crowded with work, and despite this a few of them do a great deal to encourage various activities and clubs of the undergraduates. Moreover, Oxford has a way of settling its own problems in a leisurely, quiet way.

The gift of beauty is a rare thing. Oxford still holds this gift as well as its own particular magic. For these reasons, the city has always attracted writers and creative artists. In this troubled world, it is pleasant to find that the university city has again given asylum and encouragement to a new generation of writers. These Oxford Short Stories may have the faults of youth, but they also have its freshness. Here are fifteen young and, mostly, little-known writers—may the fates of Literature deal kindly with them!

Finally, I wish to thank all the writers included in this collection for their collaboration and for their permission to print the stories. I also owe a special debt to James Mathieson for the manner in which he patiently helped to collect all the manuscripts necessary before a final selection could be made.

Oxford, 1947.

John Watney

THE PRISONER

HE sat on the river bank, in the grey slippery grass behind the reeds, undressing coyly in the manner of a modest woman who, even when alone, is afraid to see herself in the nude; and yet it was not as though she were naked, for beneath the blue printed dress, which she pulled carefully over the piled-up mass of her hair, she wore a bathing suit of pink and white crêpe de Chine that had been crimped up into ridges like sheets of delicate corrugated iron. This suit was just a size too small for her, so that it cut into her white thighs and pressed her breasts up towards her neck, until her plump white body seemed to ooze out of it like tooth-paste from a tube. However, when she had rid herself of her thin dress and had lain back in the long warmth of the waving grass, the strain lessened and her body regained the lines of ten years ago when the very thinness of her waist had been the worry of her mother and the amazement of Ben, her very first and inarticulate love. ‘Yes,’ she thought, looking down at herself through the owl-like sun glasses that she wore, ‘I haven’t kept too badly.’ It was as though she were

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speaking of some kind of cheese ; and in order to evade so unpleasant a simile, she looked at her feet. She had painted her toe-nails with more than extra care this morning, because the sun had been shining as she was dressing and it had occurred to her that the red nails, seen against the green grass, might look like small flowers, but now, although she half closed her eyes in an effort to achieve this effect they remained, obstinately and almost insolently, toe-nails.

She turned over on to her stomach and, cupping her chin in her hands, rested her elbows on the beaten down turf. In this manner she was able to peer over the top of the surrounding grass and see, three hundred yards away, her husband sitting fishing. In the grey motionless perpetuity of that figure by the bank she saw the personification of power. As he sat there, his colourless suit merging with the grey brownness of the ripe fields behind him, he became a leading part of the countryside itself. The down-turned brim of his hat, the pipe protruding from what could be seen of his sunburnt face, and the rod, loosely held, were symbols of his mastery both over her and over the surrounding fields. And now, as she watched him through resentful eyes, she wondered what it was he thought about as he sat on his little stool, fishing by the hour.

He was thinking of her, wondering how he could continue to control her; for their relationship was one of careful antagonism. He, an unsophisticated male dominated by an endless pride, lived in a state of perpetual jealousy, tormenting them both with his precautions, suspicions and accusations; while she, cut off by his jealousy from every form of contact with other men, wished for nothing more than a few words, a look, or a casual touch of the hand from another man. He realised that it was a small enough thing for her to

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ask; but if he ceded to her on this point, she would demand further concessions until he had lost his hold on her. He was, he knew, the captive of his own illogical passion; but this knowledge, instead of leading him to a reasonable conclusion, merely aggravated his self-torture. His jealousy pursued him continuously and even now he was congratulating himself upon the fact that he had taken her fishing with him. Fishing was the one pastime that he really enjoyed, but even his enjoyment here had been spoilt by the doubts that sometimes came to him as he sat by the river bank. What more perfect opportunity for a lover could there be than a husband fishing? He could see the whole scene: she running to the telephone to call up her lover, the quick, whispered conversation, the anxious yet exultant wait, the discreet sound of footsteps outside the bedroom window, the door knob turning, the moment of ecstatic reunion. . . . He was sometimes so upset by these visions that he would pull in his line and run back to the house, hoping and yet dreading to catch her in his arms. Whose arms? He did not know; but there was someone, he sensed it, he knew it, in spite of what she might say to the contrary. But now he felt safe, and could concentrate on his fishing: by giving her that particularly attractive bathing suit and by encouraging her to lie on the bank in full view of the hungry-eyed young men who passed up and down the river in their punts and canoes, he felt that he was gratifying her desire for other men's attentions and at the same time making it impossible for her to get into trouble. The only thought that worried him was what she would do when the weather broke; for although he was prepared to go on fishing ~~in the rain~~, he could hardly expect her to sun-bathe ~~in the rain~~ downpour. He could take her abroad, perhaps,



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some country where a more constant climate would keep her continually within sight. She would, he felt, enjoy that. She had never had any money and, until she had met him, had never travelled. He wondered where they should go—Switzerland, France, Spain, Austria.

Across the field of hot stubble that stretched like a scrubbing-brush from the green bank of the river to the purple shade of a line of distant beech-trees, came, slowly; a straggling line of men dressed in the brown green and blue trousers of the German prisoners of war.

They were collecting wheat sheaves and building them into high yellow stooks, while the farmer, on his tractor, in the centre of the field, was roaring relentlessly round and round the diminishing square of standing wheat, cutting into it like an armoured division into a mass of docile refugees. That, at any rate, is how it appeared to Paul Richter, one-time soldier of the Reich, now P.O.W. 621341, as he moved on the extreme left of his companions, slowly down towards the river, stuck building as he went. Richter was just nineteen. His experience of war had been short and hurried. He had been hustled through his training, rushed to the Rhine in the spring of 1945, and pushed into a large wood, the name of which he could never remember. He and his companions had stayed in that wood for three days waiting for the British or the Americans, or both, to arrive; but they never came near them, and presently word went round that the British were in front of them and the Americans behind, or it may have been the other way about; Paul could never quite remember. No more rations had come through to them, and one day an N.C.O. had told them that they were to surrender; but, first, they had to get rid of their ammunition, for no true son of Germany could contemplate surrender until his

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ammunition was exhausted. So they had spent the afternoon firing into the forest. Paul had shot up at the leaves, because he liked to watch the disturbance the bullets caused, and enjoyed seeing the small broken twigs falling to the ground like fruit from an orchard tree. The next morning they had marched out of the forest and into captivity.

Paul hated farming. He disliked the sweaty smell of his strong young body at the end of a day of harvesting; he abhorred the hot close smell of the newly cut wheat, the scratching of the thistles on his bare arms and hands, the dust that drifted over the field and mixed with the tickling heat of straw, the stubble stabbing into his ankles as he dragged the heavy sheaves across the ground, the feeling of eternal emptiness in the hot undulating fields in which he toiled—and yet, even so, he preferred working in the open to remaining in camp; for, within limits, he could move where he willed. He had in fact an illusion of freedom, and by turning his back on his companions and not looking down at himself, he could almost believe he was on his uncle's farm in Westphalia; and although he hated his uncle and thought little of his farm, the nostalgia remained to comfort him.

They saw each other simultaneously. To him she came as a vision of bare limbs and a pink and white body, lying indolently in the long grass. To her, he was a strong sunburnt man with yellow hair and a sullen look on his face. She rolled over until she was able to view him in greater comfort. He moved slowly and deliberately towards her. 'A woman,' he thought. 'I have not spoken to a woman for many months. If I am careful I can talk to her without appearing to do so.' He hesitated, for he saw at once the tedious difficulties that lay ahead. 'I will not

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speak to her,' he thought. 'It is not worth it.' Nevertheless, his work demanded that he should pass near to her. He continued to collect up the hot sheaves automatically. 'A German prisoner,' she thought. 'Poor boy; so young, so sad-looking; poor, poor boy. Of course I shall not answer him, even if he does speak to me.'

When he was within ten feet of her he knelt down by a sheaf and broke the string with a strong tug of his hand that made his fingers go white. The wheat spilled over the ground in long golden shafts. She watched him doing this, and then looked quickly round at her husband. The grey bulky figure sat on its spider-legged stool smoking in blue regular puffs. She looked back at the young German. He had pulled another piece of string from his belt and was tying the two pieces together with a slow, entwining movement of his fingers. His blonde hair fell over his pale blue eyes and, when he spoke, his lips hardly appeared to move.

"Gut afternoon," he said in a hoarse voice that sounded unreal in the hot sunshine.

She felt frightened. She began to blush. A tremor took hold of her throat. She could not speak.

"Gut afternoon," he said again, in the same impersonal tone, as his fingers tugged at the interlaced string.

"Hullo," she said at last. She was trembling with fear. What would her husband say if he came over to her now? She, his wife, talking to a German prisoner? He would never let her forget it. "How are you?" she said.

He was passing the string under the broken bundle now, lifting up the loose corn-stalks as he did so. 'Fool,' he thought, 'to speak to this woman. It will get you into trouble. Finish your work and say no more.'

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"Very well," he answered, and then came the question : "Alone?"

"My husband," she said, and as she spoke she indicated the grey figure by the river with a slight backward movement of her head. She saw the prisoner look casually up from his work, glance at her husband and then bend his head down towards the sheaf again.

"Ah," he said, "I, too, am watched," he gave the same slight backward tilt of his head and she, looking over his shoulder, saw a man in khaki sauntering among the other workers in the field; and, as she watched, she saw this man stop, look over towards them and then begin to walk slowly in their direction.

"He is coming this way," she said.

"Thank you." The German tied up the sheaf, bent down, embraced it with his arms, heaved himself to his feet and, as he turned, looked straight at her. "Thank you," he said again. "Good-bye." Then she saw only his back, the shoulder blades moving with the unhurried swing of his body.

The soldier and the prisoner passed each other without a word, and the soldier came on, until he was standing where the German had stood.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said; "I hope he's been behaving himself."

She looked up at the soldier. He was almost as young as the prisoner, but his hair was black and crisp, his face a reddish brown, and his eyes dark.

"Who?" she said in surprise.

"Him," said the soldier, nodding back to where the German was placing the sheaf on the half completed stool.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm afraid I had not noticed him. Would he be likely to make any trouble?"

"You can't always tell," said the soldier, shifting

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his feet, and looking down at her as he considered her question carefully. "Seeing as 'ow you're all alone, he might . . . "

"Oh, but I'm not alone," she replied quickly. "My husband is just there, fishing."

"Ah," said the soldier. He said it in the same tone of voice as the German. There was a mixture of respect, pity and regret in his voice. Then he smiled briefly, and said more cheerfully:

"In that case, there is nothing to worry about. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

He turned away and walked, in the same slow manner as the other, towards the middle of the field. She wanted to call after him and invite him and the German to sit with 'hc', the third prisoner, and smoke a forbidden cigarette. But as she lay back in the long grass she knew that that would be foolish, oh so foolish.

The shadow of her husband's round hat moved forward across her waist. She looked up and saw him standing above her, his head against the sky, his feet deep in the grass.

His face was hard with pain and, as he tried to understand what it was she had in mind, he thought, 'Oh God, will I always be her prisoner?'

Ludovic Kennedy

ADRIAN AND THE BUTLER

A FEW minutes before the arrival of the taxi that was to take him and his friends, Glanville and Harley, home to Humberley for the afternoon, Adrian sat in his study at Winton praying that any disaster short of death might intervene to prevent it.

Winton was the most expensive and exclusive public school in England. If you were a gentleman and very rich, like Glanville's father, you sent your son there; if you were almost a gentleman and very rich, like Harley's father, you also sent him; but if you were rather poor, you were wiser, whoever you were, not to send him—unless, like Adrian's father, you had an obsession about tradition.

Adrian's father had been well groomed in tradition. He had followed the example of his father and grandfather by capping a career at Winton with a lifetime of glorious drudgery in the dust of India. But they had been able to round off their lives in surroundings and circumstances which rising taxes and a dwindling private income had denied to him. So he had migrated

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to Humberley, a sprawling suburb in the heart of the Army training district and a recognised pastureland for old Army horses who liked grazing in company. The paddock he had chosen was called "Laurel End". For a man whose only material demands on life were three square meals a day and a pot of gum for his stamps, it suited well enough: it seemed also to satisfy his wife, Adrian's mother, a woman with the culinary gifts of a *chef d'hôtel*, the unworldliness of a saint and the appearance of a scarecrow; but it did not please his son.

Adrian hated "Laurel End" with a savage, silent hatred. He revolted at the squat, square, bleak shape of the building and the naked red bricks that beamed so brazenly from every wall: he shuddered at the prim granite plaque on which the Edwardian architect had perpetuated the date of his monstrous handiwork. His antipathy toward the inside was even keener. He resented there being only one bath and that it invariably contained a brown frothy liquid above the surface of which pyjamas and socks projected like the dead weeds of the Sargasso Sea. He was appalled at the variety of smells that emanated from the kitchen and pervaded every room. He found particularly irksome his father's military mementoes, which were scattered indiscriminately about the house; especially a pair of gigantic tusks which framed the front door in a sort of Gothic archway, and a gong, fashioned from the cylinder of an exploded shell, the relic of a distant long-forgotten campaign.

Adrian had not always hated these things: until he had stayed with Glanville and Harley he had been unconscious of them. Glanville was a viscount and the heir to a magnificent mansion in the Midlands: Harley's father shaped the destinies of the Harley Press from a

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palace of splendid vulgarity on the fringe of Ascot. At Glanville's, Adrian had played and defeated the Prime Minister at clock-golf. At Harley's, he had slept between blue satin sheets and bathed in an indoor swimming-pool. What would his friends say when they saw "Laurel End"? Adrian thought he knew, and shuddered.

A desperate eagerness to repay his friends' hospitality and a holy terror as to their reactions had warred in Adrian's mind with equal violence; and for a long time he had delayed asking them. If it had not been for the butler, he might have delayed indefinitely.

He was not, of course, a real butler. He was Adrian's father's one-time batman, and he had turned up unexpectedly at "Laurel End" the day after Ella the maid had quitted the house in an advanced state of pregnancy. When Adrian heard of his arrival, his heart jumped for joy. To him a butler stood as a huge cloudy symbol of everything that "Laurel End" was not, that his friends' houses were. A butler at "Laurel End" would raise its prestige a thousandfold: the dignity and presence that were his, the house would borrow. When he moved the tusks would droop and the gong tremble; even the terrible red bricks would blanche at his passing. Adrian clung to this idea with grim tenacity; nor did he release his hold until he had examined it from every angle and found no flaw.

But now, sitting in the taxi that was drawing them each mile nearer to Humberley, Adrian was seized with panic. All the castles he had built so carefully came tumbling to the ground. He saw the butler no longer as anointed majesty but a mutton-faced soldier with sandy hair and a questionable breath. He visualised Glanville quailing under the relentless stare of the red bricks. He pictured the look of horror on Harley's face as he

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squared up to the tusks. He saw them both advancing to the bathroom basin to find it awash in a sea of sodden socks.

There was a dig at his elbow and he became aware that his friends, who had been chattering like rooks, were addressing him.

"What's the matter with you?" said Glanville.

"You do look dismal," said Harley; "anyone'd think you were going to prison for the afternoon."

'Yes,' thought Adrian grimly, 'and they mightn't be far wrong.' He forced a smile and turned to the window. They were passing through a village a few miles from Humberley: in less than ten minutes they would be there. Adrian glanced at the cheerful faces of his companions and was appalled at the innocence of their expressions; they had not the smallest conception of what they were in for. Was it too late, he wondered, to prepare them? Some phrases came to his lips: "Oh, I forgot to tell you fellows, it's a bit quiet at home," or "You mustn't expect anything very grand." But there the phrases stuck. Whatever he said and however he put it would mean disloyalty to his parents; and he would rather have died than do that. So he sat still and suffered and said nothing.

The car bored its way through the outskirts of Humberley and his panic became more acute. Everything depended on the butler. If he failed all was lost. Adrian kept the image steadfastly before him; like the soul of Adonais it radiated comfort and inspiration.

The car turned into the little drive that ran up to the front door. Adrian crouched forward and concentrated his eyes on the floor in the manner of one who has lit upon a great nastiness. He was aware of the red bricks stepping out of the bushes to reveal their nakedness. He longed to glance at his companions to

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note their reactions, but did not dare. The taxi reached the door and came to a halt.

Now, thought Adrian, this is the moment. The door will open and the butler will advance in shining armour like an angel out of heaven. But it was not the butler who advanced. It was Adrian's mother wearing a well-used kitchen apron and with her outstretched hands liberally coated in flour: her hair hung in wisps about her forehead and she looked more like a scarecrow than ever.

"Oh, what a dreadful morning!" she said, addressing nobody in particular, "the police have just taken away your father's batman. Apparently he'd escaped from prison. Such a shock for your poor father. Lunch will be rather late, I'm afraid, and we shall all have to wash up afterwards."

"Never mind," she added cheerfully, "worse things can happen than that."

Adrian did not know of them.

In the taxi, Harley said that if that wasn't the best lunch he'd ever had, he'd eat his hat. Glanville said Adrian's father had two stamps he knew for certain the King hadn't got. Harley said there were ways and ways of making Queen's Pudding, but he'd never eaten a way like that. Glanville said the two twopenny Barbados he'd been given would complete his set. Harley said if they went back to lunch tomorrow it wouldn't be too soon. Glanville said "Hear, hear!"

But Adrian, brooding in the corner, said nothing. His eyes burned with the sullen resentful glow of a child denied its doll; of a son deprived of his lawful inheritance.

Desmond Stewart

BLUE FOR YOU, JOHNNY

THE Pincio Hill in Rome, marbled and balustraded by successive Popes, is crowned with a parklike wood. Here, in Spring, the scents are those of Arcady, and the blossoms those of Paradise. But to remind one that this is a city park, and not a mountain grove, café bars with neon lights nestle under the orange trees, selling drinks, cigarettes and cakes. And theplash of fountains can be separated, by the attentive ear, from the spluttering of public urinals, set discreetly among rocks and high-growing ferns.

Leaning over the stone balcony that edges this perfumed hill—in the evening, when the sun sets and the couples begin to saunter and the singles begin to search, the perfumes are heady, almost touchable—one has a view over the russet city. Below, at one's feet, the spacious Piazza del Popolo with its two churches. Beyond, two domes, the larger being that of Saint Peter's. And to the left—but one's eyes do not look there—is the distant glitter of white marble: the Babylonian tiers of the monument to Victor Emmanuel, Rome's one Victorian landmark.

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One cannot see the Tiber from the Pincio, since it is a small river, undistinguished, brown and furtive. But one can trace its course, and tracing it, one sees the cradle of the Rome of the Caesars, older than the Rome of the Popes, and more august: the difference indeed between the massive architecture of Caracalla, and the deceptive beauty of Bernini.

On my first evening in Rome I was gazing over this parapet, as many visitors must have done. The gloomy acres of brick and marble filled me with a sensation that was as potent to experience as it is difficult to describe. It was compounded of a sense of the past, suffused with a sense of the present: the interaction of these two producing a mongrel emotion more violent and more vital than many emotions of purer ancestry; a cocktail of history, in which the Cenci, Faustina, Caracalla and Pope Alexandre Borgia formed the basis: modern Rome, with its recent history, and its present Americans, jeeps, nightclubs, and black-market boys formed the bitters.

The highly wrought images of this cocktail, coupled with the exhaustion of a journey, put me into a stupor, dazed and yet pleasant. I was awakened from it by the consciousness that while I had been there, gazing into the increasing darkness, someone had approached. And awakening, I realised that the evening had advanced so far, that it was now impossible to discern the stranger's features, although he stood a bare yard or two away.

"Tedesco?" He suddenly broke the silence.

Why should I be German? Still more, why should he be interested? I turned to him and answered, in unpractised Italian, that I was not, that I am, in fact, and if he is interested, "Scozese, non Tedesco."

At least, I could see his smile at my affirmation of

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my Scottish nationality. His smile was white, clean and cold. And at the same time he answered in English, "But even if you are Scotch, you speak English?"

I nodded, that was certainly true.

"But you don't count yourself English?"

"Indeed not."

He laughed. "You are all the same."

"But we're not. We're all different."

"All right," he conceded. "Don't let's argue the point. I'm Sardinian, and some of the Sardinians want to be separate. It's all a bore." He fumbled in the pockets of his grey suit. "You smoke?" I shook my head. "No," I said. "I don't smoke." The packet he produced was American, similar to the ones I had seen displayed on trays in the Roman streets. The boys of the Borsa Nera peddled them for three hundred and twenty lire the packet.

"You like walking?" I could now see that the stranger was young; and he had a slim figure but was inclined to being round at the shoulders, so that his neck grew from his body less elegantly than it might have done.

Yes, I said, I did like walking. So with a gesture he indicated the gardens, and I agreed. He led the way slowly down the paths and walks which were now lit by hanging bulbs. The gardens were not full, though most of the seats were tenanted by couples, silently linked together under the encouraging lamps. The air was still and aromatic, but not heavy, as we strolled. A perfume of syringa drifted from beyond an artificial lake.

The Italian talked with a drawl which matched his remarks. His conversation was essentially aimless, drifting from one topic or complaint to another; of life in Rome, of how he was taught English by his

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governess; of how expensive things are after the war, how boring, and so on. And his suit, he told me, was made in Rome by a tailor from Savile Row. His gestures, as he spoke, were affected. Of course, all Latins 'talk with their hands', but he did not talk so much as insinuate. And his long fingers, with a large gold ring on the smallest, curled and uncurled, pointed and waved, like some fungoid plant. His eyes were deep and dark: they were not English eyes. And his curly hair was also Italian, not English. But otherwise he was all too like the young men at Christ Church who model themselves on characters in the novels of Evelyn Waugh: complacent exotics, with more interest in clothes than any of the outmoded ideals at which they now hardly bother to sneer.

By the time we had crossed and recrossed the Pincio twice, I knew much about Carlo. "My real name, the name I was given at the font," he admitted, "is Filiberto. But one cannot be smart with that name, can one?" He was the son of a Sardinian duke, a detestable man, a thief, a bore, and a womaniser. "I hope you're not a womaniser?" he said, threateningly. "I'm glad, since I'm quite neurotic. I loathe them, and especially the ones my father goes with. He lives over there." He pointed in the direction of St. Peter's. "I live with my mother in the Via Veneto, or just off it. Much more smart. But he, the old monster, has had a woman from every street between and has flaunted them everywhere."

I began to become pleasantly accustomed to the drone of Carlo's English, which was good, but nerveless. It was obvious that he had picked me up in order to have someone to whom to talk. Probably an animal or even a doorpost would have sufficed, and my responses did not matter. But as I had nothing to do, and as

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it was too early to dine, it was not without its interest to hear the Roman equivalent of Sebastian Flyte's Oxonian imitators gabbling on the Pincio. I surreptitiously glanced at my watch, and decided that I should give him another twenty minutes. But suddenly he grasped my arm. His long fingers hurt. I pulled myself clear.

"What's the matter?" I wondered if he had sensed that my attention was wandering, and had tried to recapture it by pinching. If so, he had succeeded: his grip on my arm was fierce. But his eyes told me that my guess was wrong. They seemed frightened, his manner was desperate. I could see nothing to be nervous of: only a small cluster of youths approaching from the steps that led down to the Piazza del Popolo. Besides them nothing, though a stray mongrel nosed its way round a closed café bar.

"We must go," he said. "And quickly." And seizing my arm in a way that rendered into terms of voice would be called shrill, he guided me rapidly towards the tree-hung walk that led from the Pincio to the church of the Trinita del Monte, and after that to the centre of Rome. I protested, but he brought my protests to a halt by a note of genuine fear. "Please come," he said. "Please, I am frightened." His steps, rapid and nervous, were like those of all of us when we walk through the night, thinking we are being followed. He was so frightened that he did not look behind.

We stopped beside a car. He unlocked and then jerked open the door and slithered in, dragging me after him. With a roar the engine started, and we drove away towards the Via Sistina. He had left the car pointing in the right direction, ready to leave.

• What on earth was the matter?

His face above the steering-wheel became less tense,

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though still white. He leant over, and with a twist of his fingers turned on the radio. "You like Sinatra?" The crooner's honeyed plaints issued into the steel box of the car. Carlo softly hummed.

"So so," I said.

"Cosi, cosi," he repeated, translating. "But you're not an intellectual, I hope?"

I disregarded his question. "Why did you leave the Pincio like that?"

"Because I found it a bore." He waved his hand in a gesture of ennui. "You like the Blues?"

"Some of them."

"Which?"

"St. James' Infirmary." It was the first that came into my head.

"And Blue For You, Johnny? You like that?"

The car was now whirling down the Via Tritone, missing children by feet and other cars by inches.

"Haven't heard it."

"Like to?"

"First I must dine."

"So must I." He looked at his watch. "Though it's early."

"Early . . . "

"Very. In Spain one dines at eleven in the best houses and goes to bed at three."

"But in England . . . "

"Aah, England!" And he released one ivory hand from the wheel and waved it in the air. "But England always was different. In fact, it was *England*." His gesture cost him dear. A screech of brakes, and at the corner of the Corso Umberto his Fiat hurled itself to a halt. Too late, though, as the moaning of a boy testified. A medley of staring faces surged round the windows.

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"Now I've gone and killed someone." Carlo was not frightened: he was annoyed, bored. The emotion he had shown in the Pincio had been fear; but this was only discomfiture. He turned off the radio and opened the side door, pushing out a calf-clad foot. The crowd withdrew, and Carlo walked apologetically towards a cluster of policemen. These worthies, young, stalwart, and stupid, stood in their black breeches with brown-red stripes, pushing back the crowd.

The victim was a boy of ten. He was not killed, but one of his brown legs was under the car, smeared with abrasions, and his face was smeared with dirt, where tears had wet it. The crowd gazed down, chattering, while an old woman nursed him.

"Typical Italians, aren't they?" Carlo gave a loud stage whisper. "It's a spectacle to them. They've no interest in the boy, though if he were richer, someone would be going through his pockets."

The police, who had been chattering to each other, chose one of their number, the smallest, and he strode towards Carlo. At the same time he spoke, in rapid hysterical Italian, his words gushing out like a fountain. Still unused to the Italian of the man in the street—and this was certainly not the tongue of Dante or Petrarch—I could only gather that the policeman was threatening Carlo. His face, with a two days' growth of blue beard upon it, shook with indignation. His hands even pointed in my direction, as though I too were to blame. At first, Carlo was quiet and easy. But when the little policeman advanced almost to a touching position, he withdrew two paces nearer to me, and embarked on a flood of Italian verbiage which was strange after the drawling English he had been using: it was as frenzied as the policeman's, and as loud.

The contest of eloquence lasted minutes. The crowd

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became more vociferous, fiercely in favour of the still helpless and unhelped urchin, and against the owner of the car with the coronet on the door.

The confusion was not made better by the arrival of an ambulance, careering so noisily and with such speed that it seemed that new accidents would follow in its clanging wake.

Carlo turned to me. "It seems bad. They want me to go with them and that's a bore. I wanted to play you 'Blue For You, Johnny.' "

At the sound of his English, the crowd's temper did not improve. Their chattering increased, and their circle constricted, till they were all but on top of us.

I was not enjoying the scene. I had not asked to be driven from the Pincio in this extravagant and dangerous manner.

"Look here, Carlo," I said. "I must be going . . . "

He flashed his sepulchral smile. "Will you?"

"Will you?"

I could see it was impossible.

But Carlo had his final card. Instead of withdrawing from the small policeman, he extended his hand and embraced the rough cloth of his uniform. It was the gesture of a Circe, soft and reasonable and friendly. The policeman, surprisingly, ceased his wrath and approached the shadow of the car.

Carlo offered him money.

"Five hundred lire for each of you." Carlo pointed to the man's colleagues, who, sensing the possibilities of profit had almost doubled. There were now six of them.

All this while the child lay moaning in the road, consoled by the sympathy of the old woman, who crooned over him as if he had been hers. The ambulance officials were still arranging the blankets which would carry the

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boy to hospital: and perhaps they feared to disturb the old woman in her kindly activity.

At the offer of five hundred the policeman jumped back, offended. He threw up his hands in disgust, and this was like the signal of a conductor to an orchestra: the police-chorus at once broke into voice, and this time anger was tinged with pity: the suggestion that they, police-officers of the Italian Republic, could possibly be bribed for five hundred lire was preposterous, and pitiable! Their honour was wounded. What could five hundred lire buy, anyway? One good meal, perhaps, but nothing more.

"All right," said Carlo. "What do you want?"

Once again the chorus was silent, and their spokesman advanced to parley.

"Two thousand each," he said. "Two thousand lire for seven. That is, fourteen thousand altogether." He cleared his throat, and added, "And in addition, an extra thousand for me. Fifteen thousand altogether."

This was the signal for Carlo to be brusque. He slammed the door of his car and beckoned to me, as though requesting me to accompany him to the Police Station. "All right," he said to the police, "let's go to the Station. Leave one of your men with the car. It's not safe unguarded." This was true: the crowd would not respect glass and chromium once our backs were turned.

At this display of firmness the police panicked. An angry colloquy began with their spokesman, whom they condemned for having played their cards badly. He tried to pacify them, but Carlo made their plight worse by appealing to a civilian in the crowd.

"Per favore, Signor," he began, "where is the police station. These officers of the law seem unable to conduct us themselves."

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This stratagem was effective. The huskiest policeman pushed the little one aside, and bowed his way towards Carlo.

"Permit me, Signor," he said, and opened the door of the car. To me, the foreigner, not dressed as smartly as the owner of the car, the coronet and the lire, he pointed out the door. Carlo got in and settled at the wheel.

"It was nothing, Signor," the policeman cooed. "It was the boy's fault, and I will speak to his parents about him. If he has any."

"Right," said Carlo amiably. "And how much will it be?"

"Say eight thousand . . ." The policeman's eyes were bright with a mixture of greed and caution.

Carlo produced his pocket-book. "All right, that's a thousand for each of you, and one over."

"That," said the husky officer of Italian law, "is for me."

By this time the child had been extracted from his position under the car and was in the ambulance. But the policeman and Carlo still had conversation, but so rapid, so idiomatic, and in so subdued a voice that I paid no attention. At last it ended. The door was banged and we drove off through the crowd.

"What a dear!" sighed Carlo. "He deserved his extra thousand."

"What was he saying?"

"Oh, just telling me the evenings on which he's free." Carlo switched on the radio. "I'll probably be seeing him again. I adore uniforms."

The radio was slow to warm up, but when it did it was playing "Blue For You, Johnny" on the American network. Carlo laughed as the Fiat did a corner on two wheels. "There's no need to take you home," he said.

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“We'll drive to the Janiculine instead. You'd like to see the view there. It's very splendid.”

II

Carlo has everything he wants: a palazzetta, or small palace, situated in an area of Rome so romantic that an American might offer a gold bar for a foot of its masonry; a new car that is swift, luxurious and musical, enough money to drink better wines than a gourmet in England, not on occasions, but always; clothes imported from abroad, or designed here in Italy by imported tailors. It is true his father is still alive. But even that snag is a light one, since he only sees him two or three times a year.

But Carlo is not happy.

“You put the next one on, please.” A pile of discs lies on one sofa, and he on another, with nearby a stool and a tray of drinks.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, anything.” He yawns. “Perhaps ‘Rum and Coca-Cola.’” This record is a favourite of Carlo's, and the present disc is the third copy he has bought.

The room is colourful and echoing and cool. Its ceiling, a National Monument, is a painting of a Bacchic scene. Large ladies with bare breasts press grapes to enormous mouths, while others with hefty arms clash cymbals, and appear to enjoy themselves, even if they have been engaged in this pursuit for three hundred years.

“You like this room?” Carlo had asked me on my first visit, and I had enthused over it. And certainly, it is magnificent. But now I begin to catch its ennui; the feeling, heavy as pomade and as odoriferous, that here, amidst all these cushions, life is just a little too sweet, a little too tranquil, to be endured.

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"Sometimes," says Carlo, "I wish I were a poor student and could go on treks to the hills. You know how they do?" He waves his cigarette-holder in spirals, suggesting poor students ascending hills with their packs. "The exertion's too much, of course, but it must be good staying in woods and singing. But it's no good. We can't have everything."

Carlo's friends are one of his chief troubles. There are two in particular who influence his life. It's not that he is particularly fond of them; from the way he talks about Mazzio and Sibylla one would imagine they were his enemies, or at the best, his debtors. But in the large train of foreigners, policemen, students, artists, society youths, criminals, and soldiers who compose the human background of Carlo's existence, this couple remain constant.

"Mazzio is a poor friend for me, I agree with you. His father's very rich, of course, but absolutely nobody —just cement, or something like that. You have the same sort of people in England, I don't doubt."

Indeed we have!

Carlo nods his head. "Yes, I imagine you have them even more, England being an industrial country. But Mazzio and I have done so much together we just can't part."

Mazzio and Carlo are inseparable. They are like brothers, or better, sisters, who remain biologically united, even when temperament or situation divide them.

Carlo is older, more intelligent, and I think pleasanter than Mazzio. Despite his vanity, his ennui, and his lack of feeling, he is yet kind-hearted in an unimpassioned way, and he lacks malice. But Mazzio, only twenty-one, and with a sharply cut face, is malice incarnate.

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The first time I met him was three days ago at Rupert's. Rupert's in the Via Veneto is a Ritzycafé where there are two specialities, women in high hats, and chocolate ices piled round mounds of cream. Here, in the afternoons, the 'smart set' congregates, or as much of it as is not at tennis, home or love. There is a long bar downstairs, and a streetside café. Upstairs there is a lounge modelled on somebody's conception of what a Louis-Seize drawing-room should look like. At one end there is a full-length portrait of Madame Dubarry.

This is Carlo's favourite meeting-place, and I met Mazzio under the portrait.

"H'llo, my dear," said Carlo, drawling. "I'd have you meet Mazzio." My hand is limply held by a young man in white-grey flannels. Although it is still April, his eyes are obscured by dark glasses: it is hard to know where he is looking; no doubt for this reason Mazzio wears them.

For the first five minutes he gushed over me. "My dear, I'm so interested in English, aren't I, Carlo?" He appealed to his friend for confirmation. "But then, we all are nowadays. We all go to the Theatre Barberini to see the American films: every Thursday there's a new one. Have you seen Gregory Peck's latest? They were fighting outside the doors." He giggled.

Perhaps the fact that I have not seen Gregory Peck's latest ruins me for this combination of hips, mouth, sharp nose and blacked-out eyes. Anyway, as soon as Carlo's always insecure attention is occupied elsewhere—on this occasion with two other friends—he turns to me, *sotto voce*, smiling but barbed.

"And where did Carlo find you?"
Slightly taken aback, I stalled. "How do you mean?"
A metal laugh from Mazzio. "But, my dear, you

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surely didn't come to Rome with a letter of introduction?"

That, I have to admit, is true. "On the Pincio."

This set Mazzio into a ballet-posture of amusement.
"Incredible!"

"But why don't you believe it?"

"I do—all too well."

"Then why incredible?" His remarks nettled me.

"Just because. But shush!" And he curbed his laugh as suddenly as though it were an electric appliance that he was switching off. "Carlo!" His face was totally grave, and his manner reasonable, as he turned to his friend.

Carlo had meanwhile escaped from his two other friends. "Yes, Mazzio? Another ice?"

"No, thanks, I must fly. But your friend's been telling me the most wonderful story."

Carlo suspected nothing. "Do share it."

"It was nothing," I said.

But Mazzio gushes on. "Oh, wasn't it? I found it madly amusing."

Carlo's face is honestly amused in anticipation:
"What was it about?"

"Two Sardinians," Mazzio answered. "On the Pincio."

Colour suddenly deserted Carlo's cheeks. "Oh, yes," he answered darkly. "Have another ice, Mazzio." But the latter, having noticed everything from behind his glasses, merely smirked. "No, dear. Sibylla will be waiting. Till tomorrow."

After this smiling reference to the Sardinians on the Pincio—foolishly I had told Mazzio of the men we had seen and Mazzio himself had inserted the fact that they were Sardinians, Carlo went as white as the ice-cream.

He held out his hand to me.

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“We meet then . . . ?”

His hand was damp and wet, and hardly engaged mine.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow.” He withdrew his hand and wiped it on his handkerchief.

“Meanwhile, I must stay now, to meet someone.”

This was my cue to depart. “Good-bye.”

Outside it was cool, and a few clouds sported over the gardens of the Villa Borghese. I returned to the Hotel Julius, where my two English friends were having tea. They had spent the afternoon inspecting a church on the Aventine, and were deep in the middle of a quarrel.

III

In some sense Carlo must be a Roman, and not just a racial sport. If heraldry means anything, and is not on a level with bell-ringing, philology or palmistry, there must be some connection between Carlo and those barbarians who, having overthrown the power of the empire, were overawed by her majesty, and made themselves *quasi* Romans as quickly as possible. For although a Sardinian, Carlo claims descent from Roman patricians of the sixth century.

Or has the wheel turned full cycle? If that is so, then Carlo is today the equivalent of those powerless but decorative *cultivés* whom his ancestors saw, and wondered at, and finally imitated.

“I speak five languages from personal contact now.” For once he preens himself on an intellectual accomplishment. Usually it is skiing, dancing, or boxing that he brags about. “German, Polish, English, American—I found that the easiest, as the Americans are so friendly—and Romanacca. The latter? To be honest, I

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am proudest of that. It's the Roman cockney, and I'm the first member of our family to talk it."

Thus the nationalities have come to Rome in the last years, and Carlo has known them all. He likes the Americans best. Why? Largely because they have caused him the least trouble, and are the most awed by his coronet, his palazzetta, and his background. The Americans fill the role of admiring barbarians most successfully. I have seen six of them gazing spellbound—the motion of their gum-chewing jaws all but stopped—while Carlo signed their autograph books one after another. Had he been Hedy Lamarr they could not have been more pious.

This pleases the young man who, on his mother's side, is descended from the Borgias.

Despite his preference for Americans, Carlo has had friendships with all the nations whose languages he talks. And his conversation is piled with the first names of friends, which is confusing until one becomes practised. Or to be exact, his conversation is full of the names of his Polish, English, American and Roman friends: only after he had gathered that I was not anti-German would he confess that his *best* friend had been a young Tedesco from Saxony. And even now, although I know that Willi's photograph is always with him, he is careful about mentioning friendship with Germans. That is, perhaps, one Roman aspect of his character—his almost neurotic discretion, which foreigners or ill-wishers might construe as two-sidedness.

During the war Carlo had been an officer. Mussolini never managed to establish the totality of socialism in Italy that Hitler achieved in the north, and family influence had carried Carlo to the rank of lieutenant in five days.

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But his career as an officer was neither long nor unclouded. He had formed friendships with those of lower social and military standing than himself. He had found it difficult to wake up at the right times, and impossible to march. And he had been obsessed, throughout the Summer of 1941, with thinking of Rome, ice cream at Rupert's, Sibylla, Mazzio, and the bathing at Ostia. (Mazzio had been too young for conscription.) But most of all he had thought of Rome.

"Rome is like that, you know, wonderful when you're away, a terrible bore when you're there. You just go frantic. You don't? But you will. The same old streets, the same dirty people, and the same boring jokes. It's stifling, especially if like me you're a black papal catholic. We're always noticed." He looked around him at all the furnishings of the room as though they were people eager to recognise him. "After a month, you begin getting up later in the morning. Then you don't get up in the morning at all. And you start doing inane things. You're like me, perhaps, and nervous of getting fat. Well, you start yogurt lunches. No breakfast, and only yogurt for lunch. It's so good for the skin that one forgets it's fattening. And then you find that all the yogurt in Rome is bad, except for one little Trattoria that sells it, and that is somewhere in the slums. And you begin going there every day when you get up, at one. You daren't take the car, in case they smash it, or rob it. They're very communist down there."

Carlo draws breath. "Well, one cannot go by tram. You've seen the trams, have you?" I have. They rush through the streets shrieking, rattling, shaking, so that they remind one of a herd of cattle in stampede. They are packed to the doors, except late at night, and one sees helpless passengers hung from outside,

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being shaken as though in a torture of the Inquisition.

"Yes, I've seen the trams."

"Well, you'll realise how impossible it is to go to this yogurt place by tram. The only way left is by taxi. I won't mention bicycle, as naturally everyone would think I'd gone mad if they saw me on a cycle. So I go by taxi each day, and have it wait while I eat my yogurt. Then I come back, and of course I have to stop at Silvestro's to hear the new Sinatras. If they've come in, that is, which they usually haven't. And by that time I'm so tired and hungry I have the man drive to Rupert's, to have a chocolate ice. Then, of course, I meet Mazzio or another of my horrid friends. And when they see me eating a chocolate ice with mounds of whipped cream, it makes me so depressed to think of how fat I'm getting and how much I must be owing the taximan that I have another at once. And if it happens to be Sibylla who sees me, one look from behind her dark glasses and I order two ices, and a coca-cola, too."

This long recital has not exhausted Carlo, and he is still not finished. But he talks softly, monotonously, only emphasising what he has to say here and there with a raised finger or a bored smile. And, after all, he has nothing to do except talk. He goes on.

"So, then evening comes, and I've spent several thousand lire on taxis, when a yogurt only costs fifty. So I feel depressed. Night again, I say, and where to go? There's the Rupe Tarpaea in the Via Veneto. The Flopsy in the Piazza Barberini. Or I try somewhere new. Perhaps Mazzio has told me of a new place, like the Vestal Virgin, which I went to last week, before I met you. So I go and what is there? Just dancing and lots of whisky, which is a dreadful price, but which I must drink, or everyone I meet will think I'm on the rocks.

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There's a good band, perhaps, and we do the samba. But, about two, some of my friends come in and see me talking to someone they don't like the look of, and I feel it's time to go. So I come back here, alone, as all my friends are asleep at home, or like you at their albergo. I put on my records. I think of Theodore, or Butch, or"—and his voice drops—"of Willi, and how they liked 'Nancy,' 'The Man I Love,' or 'Night and Day.' Willi adored 'Blue For You, Johnny,' the pet. His tastes were not all that immature, when you think that good music was banned in Germany. And I feel sad. I look out of the window, and it's just the same. My mother's upstairs in bed, but awake thinking over the family's economic position. I'm up, having spent too much, and feeling miserable and desperately fat. Perhaps I weigh myself, and find I'm seventy kilos. It's always more than I thought, and I get bluer and bluer. I pour out a Campari, and feel no better. It's too late to telephone. And it's no good writing to my friends, as I find they never get my letters, or if they do, they don't answer them.

"So I decide: Rome's a bore. I'll take a plane tomorrow, to Palermo if it's November, or Venice if it's June. And then I find my yogurts have been costing me too much. All my boring pleasures have been costing too much for me to get away from them. And I can't go. And I suddenly begin to dream of Switzerland and the divine skier from Sweden I told you about. And it's hopeless, as one Swiss franc costs us two hundred lire. And you need fifty Swiss francs a day to do things properly.

"So you see what a bore it all is?"

For some time the gramophone has been silent. Carlo leaps to his feet and moves towards it.

"St. Louis Blues? Theodore found it his favourite."

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I put out a restraining hand. "No."

"You don't like it?"

"It's not that."

What it is I should find it hard to define. But Carlo's ennui, which at first seemed so incredible to me, in a town which is as varied and as vivacious as Rome, so much a mixture of virtue and vice, is contagious.

"Let's go somewhere." Carlo extends his hands, but I stand up of my own accord.

"Yes, let's go somewhere."

Carlo consults his watch. "We'll take the car. We'll dine in a little place I know of, where no one ever goes whom one knows." Is he ashamed of me, too? or is it just a habit to be cautious, to evade, to slink? He begins to be excited at the prospect of something to do. "And afterwards? Perhaps there'll be some interesting people at the Rupe Tarpea?"

"Or the Vestal Virgin?" I suggest. Mazzio probably knows about these sort of things.

"Or the Flopsy in the Piazza Barberini," he finished.

We go out into the Roman night, and for ten seconds we are under the stars till once again the civilised belly of the Fiat encloses us, and over the radio comes an American crooner. Carlo turns him louder, until the noises of the city are swamped. But through the clean polished glass I see the sea-monster of Bernini blow his fountain into the warm Roman air. I see the black-market boys behind their counters on the pavement, and the strolling Americans looking for someone to change their money for them. We turn into the road of the Four Fountains. A glimpse of the fountains: they are mossy and antique, and water slobbers from them, rather than founts. But they are beautiful. Then past the ruins of Diocletian's baths, brown and square, and not as impressive now as the

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baths of Caracalla. They have been turned into a church. And then, another square, and we are by the Esquiline, under the eminence on which stands Santa Maria Maggiore, and away to the left, against the velvet sky, the pure white arches of Mussolini's station. It has been left unfinished, and under its dignified silence the trams squabble along dirty runways, hooting and rattling: they cannot have been built since before the first world war, but they'll probably have to do as long again before they are removed.

"The Trattoria should be somewhere here," said Carlo. "It's named after Manzoni's book, 'I Promessi Sposi'." And once again we are under the stars, but only for a moment while Carlo locks the car. From inside the Trattoria a violin is playing. I do not know the tune, but it is sweet and sad.

"Roman folk music," said Carlo as we strode inside.

"We'll sit here." The violinist, a man of sixty with grey hair and unhealthy olive skin, bows in our direction. He wears a celluloid collar, and the grey hairs that circle his scraggy neck bristle. The other clients look poorer than we do, so he asks us our request.

"'Begin the Beguine,' per favore," said Carlo, at the same time scanning the menu. The violinist bows ever lower, and obliges. The room is suddenly full of Cole Porter: this Trattoria might be in New York, and these people might be Italian exiles, their rubicon crossed.

Carlo heaves a sigh of relief. The Roman atmosphere is put to flight, and he studies his nails with pleasure.

But the sudden transition from a love-song older than America to Cole Porter has not pleased everyone as much as him. At a nearby table sits a young man, with deep earnest eyes and close curly hair, more brown than black. On the table before him stands

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a mezzo litro bottle, and in it the last inches of red wine. When we came in, I noticed that he was sitting by himself, his head in his hands.

But now his evening had ended. He stood up, pulling a bundle of dirty Italian money from his pocket, all paper, and in small units. Counting out sixty lire, he handed them to the waiter and brushed out, turning at the door to give a last glance at the two Englishmen who asked for 'Begin the Beguine'. His face had hatred in it, but also sadness. It is a face I shall not forget. Carlo also catches his eye, but turns back to his fingernails without apparent interest.

"Who would he have been? A student?"

"Probably. Our Roman students are all too poor to be pleasant, and of course, much too serious. I prefer your undergraduates: they are so much more gentlemanly." Carlo taps on the table with his now approved fingernails.

"Waiter," he says in Italian, "give the violinist these hundred lire, and ask him if he knows 'Baby, It's No Sin'."

A litre bottle of wine is brought 'to begin with' and we start our meal.

"I have often thought," says Carlo, his mouth full of shrimps, "that Oxford might be amusing, if one did not have to study."

"That is quite unnecessary."

"Really? How wise! You must tell me all about it."

But I am given no chance. At that moment a woman enters the Trattoria who looks, Carlo exclaims, exactly like Sibylla will look when she is fifty, gaunt, artificial, and tubercular. He finds this an amusing thought, and starts on a chain of anecdotes, of the kind which lead on from each other without a pause. "You must meet Sibylla." And he adds with a smile,

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"You're certain to, if you stay round with me." And the meal rushes by in a whirl of remembered amusement—Venice; Cinzano, a boy with one blue eye, one brown; a Pole who told fortunes but did not foresee his own death by drowning off the Lido hotel; Sibylla's affair with a half-caste in Majorca; was Chopin really in love with Georges Sand; last Summer in Como when I was eighty kilos. It was ten o'clock before he had finished. And at ten o'clock the Rupe Tarpaea would be getting gay.

"Let's go," said Carlo, and we went, bowed out by the waiter, violinist, and maître d'hôtel. But during the brief moment of silence while Carlo fits his key into his car, I hear a sad traditional air reconquer the restaurant, and a voice singing, not of palms swaying and orchestras playing, but of love and death, Rome and eternity.

IV

The Vestal Virgin proves to be the only night-haunt at which we stay for any time. The Rupe Tarpaea, with its sham old-Roman brickwork, is dull. The Flopsy, as Carlo puns it, is a flop, full of Americans and their whores. We stay there about half an hour, and regret every minute.

But the Vestal Virgin, near the Pantheon, is entertaining. On the second floor of an old palazzo, it is modern. A liftboy in an American-style uniform ushers us into a smart tinny lift and whisks us skywards. He is like an advertisement for Philip Morris cigarettes, and his lift suits him.

"The Vestal Virgin, gentlemen!" His accent is American, but he bows us out into the foyer with true Italian verve. Carlo hands him a hundred lire and the boy contorts himself with obsequiousness.

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The host suavely advances.

"A table for two?"

"Certainly, Sir. Near the dancing?"

"That would be nice."

"You want some girls?"

"No, thanks." We enter the dancing-room.

Another waiter approaches. "You want some nice girls?"

"No, thanks," says Carlo, murmuring to me, "He gets a rake-off, I imagine." The waiter retires. "Some nasty ones might be fun. But even nasty ones would be a bore, on second opinions."

The room is in darkness, except for a spotlight which gads round the floor in pursuit of a dancer with castanets. We settle ourselves at a table and order whiskies. Meanwhile, I notice that we are the only two sitting at the circle of tables near the floor, and unfortunately the 'lady with the castanets' has seen this, too.

"Hadn't we better retire?"

"Why?"

"This is rather prominent."

Carlo, who finds the dark relaxing, refuses. "I find this amusing, and besides, I'm shortsighted."

The dancer continues her whirling paces, bending and contorting and clicking, the colour of her splayed dress changing with the changing hues of the spotlight. There is something pathetic about her fixed smile, which has more strain to it than mirth. And every time she passes our table she comes a little closer and smiles a little more. Finally, as her dance reaches orgasmic intensity, it is possible to discern a scent by no means pleasant, half perspiration, half cheap perfume. The poor thing is tired out, and far too old for this exertion.

The lights go on. There is moderate applause. The

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dancer bends low on the floor in the direction from which the stipple of clapping comes, and then, with a haughty gesture to a waiter, to us a smile, has a chair fetched and joins us at the table.

She will drink whatever we are drinking, she says, and has a double whisky. And could we give her a cigarette? A packet is bought. She inserts it into her dress.

“You’re not Italian?” Practised as she must be, she seems nervous as she fiddles with her castanets.

This delights Carlo. “No? But I am.”

“And yet you’ve been talking German?”

He shrugs his shoulders at her ignorance. “Don’t you know English when you hear it?”

“I know German when I hear it,” she said doggedly. Her hair, piled up in half bleached waves, conceals a forehead that would delight a phrenologist. It is small, receding, and without a wrinkle.

“Well, I don’t know a word of German. It was English, I assure you.”

She obviously does not believe Carlo. “Your friend is English, then?”

“Sort of.” Carlo finds it difficult to go into all this, but she is insistent.

“You mean he’s American, then?” She examines me hopefully, as Americans are thought to be Midases.

“No, he’s Scotch.”

“Ah, Scotch!” she says with enthusiasm. “A wonderful people, and he’ll speak Polish, I suppose?”

“No,” says Carlo, “English.”

This is too much for the girl, who looks dumbfounded, and gulps her whisky, so that another has to be bought. “Why have you no signorinas with you?”

“Why should we?”

“Why not?”

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"But we've met you?"

She is delighted and extends a hand to each of us. Now the lights go out again and she still holds our hands, but more tightly. It is the turn of another woman to perform. She sings.

This lasts all evening, for three hours, with more whiskies, more cigarettes, more cabaret. And the conversation follows the same lines, beaded with bouts of giggles as everybody gets drunk, pausing in silent stalemates when each theme exhausts itself.

Finally, we rise to go, and Hilda throws a threadbare fur coat round her shoulders to accompany us. But Carlo repulses her, giving her a note for a thousand lire, and telling her not to cry. But she follows sobbing to the doorway, asking why we are not satisfied with her?

"If it's because you are two," she pleads, turning on a smile as quickly as she had turned on her tears, "we can manage. I've a friend who'd love to come. Or we could just be friendly, us three."

Carlo is firm. "Another night." She dries her eyes at this promise. "Another night. But today we're tired."

We are good customers and the host bows us into the lift, which has deposited a load of American sailors in the foyer. As the Philip Morris boy slams the grating of the lift, I see Hilda's white powdered back retreat into the dancing room, twined by a thick arm in navy blue.

"Lucky girl!" says Carlo. "She has it every way."

V

Carlo has frequently exclaimed, "You must meet Sibylla!" but it is some time before I do. Sibylla has been in the north ski-ing, but is due back for a party at

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the Palazzo C. This edifice, known to every tourist, is, like Carlo's ceiling, a National Monument. This means that Carlo's friend, who owns it, is forbidden to alter or deface it, even if he should so wish.

The last of the C. family, Andrea, is another member of the smart set, though duller and more normal in his smartness than either Carlo or Mazzio. In fact, he is shortly expected to marry. "Which will annoy every girl in Rome except the one he chooses," Carlo confides.

"And who will that be?"

"My dear, no one knows, and least of all Andrea himself. With the lira fluctuating as it is, with the communists threatening to nationalise land, and with everyone's hopes turning from Europe to South America, it is hard for him to make up his mind."

This business attitude will prevent Sibylla from getting a look in as a matrimonial possibility.

"Lots of the right blood," Carlo says quaintly. "All as blue as anything, but no beans. And what's blood without beans?"

The entrance hall of the Palazzo, normally encumbered with a ticket office and trilingual notices directing the visitor to the picture gallery, the banqueting hall, the gardens and the 'gabinetti gratuiti', has been cleared. The centre of the floor is occupied by a long table of ebony. On its gleaming surface Andrea, under the guidance of Mazzio, has created a décor that sets everyone talking. Three tall silver obelisks are placed at intervals on the surface, and between them, lusciously perfumed, are three gigantic pyramids of red carnations. Each pyramid is surmounted by three ostrich feathers, two pink, one pale blue.

"Such exquisite taste!" Carlo flashes his festive rings

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in the direction of the pyramids. "Three pink feathers and it would have been horrible. But two pink, one blue, and it's a masterpiece." He bends over the flowers and inhales. Then beckons to me to do likewise.

"Get it?"

I too inhale: the scent is overpoweringly sensual, and not at all like carnations. It reminds me of a day I spent at Kew, when a certain woman in furs made the flowers wilt.

"Andrea sprinkled Schiaparelli over them: it makes the atmosphere more preparatory, don't you think?"

We progress up the stairs, admiring the footmen in Ottocento livery and powdered wigs. Each bears a gigantic candlestick, whose light flatters the visitors, who con themselves in the mirrors that line the stairs. "Again, Mazzio helped with the selection," said Carlo. "Andrea himself has no eye for men, or, for that matter, for anything except foxhounds. He has Bourbon blood, of course, and inherits something of the tastes, if not the nose, of Ferdinand the Fourth."

The ballroom has almost come alive, but not quite. For though the descriptive notices have been taken down, and though a merry orchestra is already busy on a platform, everything is still mindful of a museum. The hall is un-lived in, cold, despite the aromatic fire set deep in its decorated cavern. The accoutrements are all too much like collection-pieces; even the brass fire-dogs one could envisage in the Victoria and Albert. But to banish any possible censoriousness on the part of the guests, the ante-room flows with Italian champagne, and sparkles with the conversation you hear in any Ritz in any capital, though one would concede that in Italian it is brighter and less tired.

Sibylla is one of these. She holds a cocktail in one hand, while with the other she runs her fingers through

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the thinning hair of an American officer. This stout gentleman sits in an armchair like a tom-cat, obviously savouring this public moment, and storing it up till he gets back to the folks in Oklahoma, or wherever the folks live. California, perhaps, as he has a flabby, well-nourished appearance that speaks of sunshine and good food. If he could bother to strain his head upwards, however, and see the look of contempt on his favourite countess's face, he might be less complacent.

“Sibylla, darling, meet my new friend.”

The ivory fingers stop running through American hair, and shake my hand instead. It is true, what Carlo has always assured me, that she is beautiful. Sometimes one hears of English women as being beautiful in a unique, fair-complexioned manner. Sibylla has all that, from her oat-blonde hair to the soft flesh of her neck and back, smooth and taut, like a shepherd's, but a shepherd who has taken remarkable care of himself; a sort of permanent Alexis. (I do not compare her to a shepherdess, as who has seen one and not been disappointed?) But in addition to this fragonard beauty, she has much more; and if I could describe it aptly, I should do what the writers of *Vogue* strive to do, but fail—convey feminine verve and vitality and grace without making it sound like a beauty preparation or a new sewing-machine. Sibylla's body is lithe and strong, and yet feminine. It is as though a jaguar had been poured into a Greek goddess: all that marmoreal beauty, but electrified, tautened, jazzed up.

“Hello!” She speaks through lips of marble, framing the word between perfect teeth. And as she speaks I realise the secret of Sibylla's hold over Carlo and his friends. She is completely, unaffectedly, dead: dead as ashes; bored as cinders. “Hello!” she says to a hundred new sensations every day, and in her heart she yawns,

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each time she speaks, O God!—if she bothers to invoke a deity she regards as dead as herself. Everything is always the same, always. And I am no exception.

“You like Rome?”

“Enormously.”

“I’m so glad.” But she means, ‘You would. But you wouldn’t if you knew it as well as I do.’ Which might be true, as it is apparent from the way she talks that knowledge of things, to her way of thinking, is “seeing through things”: and she has seen through Rome.

“Yes, it’s marvellous, Sammy, all these ruins.” The American had chirped up from his chair about how historical everything is. “You’ll have seen them all?”

“Christ, not yet,” he laughs. “Give me time.” And collecting himself, “Excuse that Christ, but I’m a little tight.” She smiles. “Don’t bother about that: I’m sure He doesn’t.” And to me, “Care to dance? I’ll show you the art of the samba.”

She does this adeptly. But when we return to Sammy and Carlo and the drinks and the busy conversations about nothing in particular, I feel empty and flat, rather like a new meteor that has been instructed in space-travel by a senior burnt-out star, cold, remote and bored.

Andrea is a nice young man. There is nothing startling about him, except his ears, which stick out too much, and his suave manner, which is smooth as silk. He takes Sibylla for the next dance, and Carlo takes her for the one after that, and I only see her hair gliding through the darkness of a hundred other heads.

“Gee, this Sibylla’s some dame!” Sammy exclaims, with the easy genius of his race for stating the obvious, as though it were profound. He is tight, too, which helps.

“Known her long?” He eyes me a little aggressively.

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“No.”

“Like her?”

“I think so.”

Suddenly the American seizes his drink and confronts me earnestly.

“You find Sibylla cold, perhaps? A little like an iceberg?”

“I don’t know her well enough to say. She certainly has a magnificent figure.”

The American officer slaps his khaki thighs, and his eyes sparkle from behind their Himmler-type spectacles. “And I can vouch for it.” Then, growing confidential once again, he draws even closer to me, so that I can smell him: his scent is half after-shave lotion, half bad breath: not pleasant. “No one understands Sibylla.”

“Except you?”

“Yeah, except me. I understand her. They say it takes an opposite to evaluate. She’s an aristocrat, a European, an antique. I,” and he braced back his shoulders in his padded slink-cut uniform, “I am an American, which means I’m new, democratic, like a gust of clean prairie air. That poor girl’s bored stiff with all these dagoes. They bore her, take my word for it. That’s why she goes round with all these cissies to get a new thrill. That’s all. But what she craves is something new. And you know who’ll give it to her?”

I shake my head dutifully, though knowing all too well. “No, who?”

“Myself,” he says. “And now another whisky.”

But of course the American is hopelessly wrong. Sibylla’s boredom has long embraced sex. Carlo told me as much before he brought me to the party. “She’s marvellous, they say. Like a machine. But she hates doing it. She only goes on to keep herself in opium and cars.”

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But Sammy is convinced that his arms, his lips, will fire her. And this certainty is written on his face when he leads her round the floor. But it would take more than Sammy to blow fire into those ashes. And I, who can see Sibylla as she dances better than the spectacled American picking out his steps in a fog of alcohol, can see that she would swap all the gusts of air in all the prairies for one pinch of oblivion.

Midnight came and passed. Its coming was marked by hilarity and more Italian champagne. Its going was covered over in the luxury of a waltz. But one o'clock was different.

For there was the sudden sound of fracas.

We were in the ante-room. Andrea was talking to a slim dark girl, about whom Mazzio was chatting to Carlo. Sibylla was at her post with Sammy. The rest of the space was packed with bodies whose faces became blurred to me, and whom I would not remember in the morning.

The noise was from outside: it was of high rowdy voices shouting, mingled with soft insistent ones trying to dissuade.

"Who can this be?" Andrea asked, his arm round his girl-friend.

Sibylla and Mazzio exchanged a smile.

"I can't think." Sibylla smiled at Mazzio again, and then turned to Carlo. "Can you imagine?"

Carlo replaced his glass on a table, and rubbed his hands together.

"No, I can't imagine." He was nervous.

"Can you imagine?" I asked Sibylla.

"Of course not," she said, and once more smiled at Mazzio as though he and she shared a secret.

"The voices are rather common, I think," Mazzio remarked. They were nearer now. Any moment some-

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one might appear. "Perhaps they are the avant garde of the new Revolution."

This remark worked the same effect on Carlo that the appearance of the two men on the Pincio had done, or the mention of them in Rupert's, when his face had gone the colour of ice cream, and he had dismissed me so abruptly.

Suddenly the owners of the voices entered the room. There were about twenty of them. They pushed their way in, scattering protesting footmen like St. Bernards scattering poodles.

There were two flashes: metallic lights preserved the moment scientifically.

Carlo was terrified, and retreated rapidly towards a door marked *donne*.

"Come back, dear," Sibylla shouted. "You'll get into the most dreadful trouble if you gatecrash the ladies." But he fled through the doorway.

The gang of men with their cameras confronted us across the debris of champagne and sandwiches. There was a flickering silence. They wore slouch hats in the popular American style, with very broad brims. Someone in our party whispered, "They're communists!"

One of their number advanced two yards with his camera, and focused it on Andrea, Sibylla and myself. I turned my back. There was another flash of incandescent light, and simultaneously with it the sound of Andrea's fist meeting jawbone, and the rash photographer lay on the floor rubbing himself pathetically. One of his comrades rescued the camera and made off with it, past the protesting footmen. This was a signal to the rest, who turned and vanished as rapidly as they had come.

But this eruption ended the party, though one or

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two more dances were played, and one or two more bottles broached.

"We'll all be in the papers tomorrow," Andrea observed stoically and sadly. "New scenes of debauchery in Roman society." He filled his dark companion's glass, and held her hand protectively.

Mazzio laughed. "Funny about Carlo!"

"What a neurotic! I'd better go and tell him he can come out." Sibylla sidled off in the direction of the door marked *donne*.

But before he ventured from his hiding-place, I departed and walked home alone through the moonlit streets. On one of the walls in the Street of the Four Fountains someone had scrawled a new slogan: "Give the gardens of the rich as playing-fields for youth."

Next day we were in the papers, though fortunately my back was all that was visible in the vista of debauchery. Comment was fierce. When would this sort of thing stop? Who gave permits for powdered flunkeys? Where did the money come from? Why was the Palazzo not turned into a hospital? In all the pictures Sibylla came out the best. She alone gazed from the orgy—for so the scene appeared when set down in black and white—as though neither startled nor ashamed. In truth, she looked as though the whole thing had been no surprise.

In the afternoon I called at Carlo's palazzetta.

No one answered the door, and as it was ajar I walked in. The hall with its statues was quiet. But there was the sound of voices from Carlo's drawing-room.

"My dear, it's you! You're just in time to tell us where he's gone to." Sibylla stood with Mazzio in the midst of a debacle. Books were all over the floor. The

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radiogram was open. Bottles lay on their side. Packing paper and sawdust littered the sofa.

Mazzio giggled. "His fear of communists has finally driven him away."

Sibylla poured me a drink from an open Campari bottle.

"You've no idea?"

"None."

"Did he ever mention where he might go?"

"Venice?" I hazarded.

"Too far north. The communists are very active there." Sibylla dismissed Venice.

Mazzio suggested Palermo.

"Too hot."

I suggested his home, Sardinia.

At this they both laughed.

"No, not Sardinia. That's where it happened."

"What happened?"

They both laughed again and with even less humour.

"What now frightens him."

"But what is that?"

"I've never quite discovered," Sibylla admitted.

"I'd dearly like to. But something to do with two young men. Perhaps they denounced him for being Fascist? I don't know. Carlo collaborated with the regime, like all of us. But, unlike us, he is more nervous, and perhaps more consistent." They both roared with laughter. "But, anyway, he lives in terror of something. It's the one thing in life that's still amusing."

"And you see," said Mazzio, "we must get on to his tracks, or we'll die of boredom. Won't we, my angel?" She kissed him in the affirmative.

"But how do you know he's left Rome? And why do you think I should know? You both know him far better."

BLUE FOR YOU, JOHNNY

"This told us." Sibylla stooped down and picked up an envelope. "We opened it, of course. It was addressed to you."

I read it.

"Carol!" it said. "I've had to go away on business. Don't tell my friends. I've sold all my records to make it possible. But you're to keep this one. See you when I return. Love. Carlo."

The one I was to keep was *Blue For You, Johnny*.

"I can tell you nothing," I told Sibylla and Mazzio.
"Nothing."

They looked at their watches.

"Rupert's?" Mazzio queried.

"They'll all be aching to ask us about last night," said Sibylla. "We'll be the people of the hour."

"How did the Communists discover about the meeting?"

They both laughed. "We told them." Mazzio smirked. Sibylla embroidered. "It's good for Andrea to wake up to realities, the little idiot! And it was fun seeing Carlo's terror."

"And we have to live," Mazzio added. "And nowadays the only people with money are the Reds." The two of them roared with cold laughter once again, till they seemed convulsed. But their laughter stopped as precisely as it had begun.

"We must go."

I was left alone. I put the record on the machine, and suddenly felt blue for Carlo. Even the worst become beautiful when they take their place amongst the past, and Carlo, with all his fatuity, with all his crazed despair, had done just that. And regretting him, I lay on his sofa and yawned.

Francis King

MONA

WHEN Captain Manson had been gassed during the Great War, a grateful country sent him and his best friend, who was in a like predicament, to Davos to be patched up. The friend died, but Captain Manson, being more fortunate, escaped to a life of semi-invalidism.

Having returned to England in 1919, he rented Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby's summer-house and three acres of land, and lived there, a recluse, on his small pension. On Thursdays he went into the village, a distance of some four miles, to change his library books and buy tobacco and provisions for the week. For the rest of the time he busied himself with his small-holding. He grew vegetables and kept rabbits and two goats. At first people in the surrounding cottages had been suspicious, but after a few years, they had decided that he was 'odd' and no one now troubled about him. He spoke little, and was seldom to be seen away from his piece of land.

He was a small man, very thin, with red freckles, and sandy hair, which grew sparsely on his head, but very

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thick on the backs of his hands. His bearing was still martial, he spoke in a dry, clipped voice, his clothes were scrupulously neat and clean.

He was a man without friends or near relatives. True, some cousins, hearing news of him through Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby, had once gone to the trouble of driving over to visit him. But when the four of them crowded into the small summer-house, he had shouted at them in panic: "No, no! Only one at a time! There's not enough air for all of you! Please! Only one at a time!" Breathless and gasping, he had bundled them out into the open.

They stayed for a short time longer, and then left; they never came again. They too decided, as the villagers had done, that he was 'odd'. There was nothing one could do for him.

For much of the winter he was bed-ridden; but there were always the animals to be fed, he would never entrust them to anyone else, so even when he had a fever he would have to drag himself out of bed, put on an old trench coat and a balaclava helmet, and fetch them food. He never saw a doctor. In the diary which he kept, four lines for every day, he noted his symptoms with scientific accuracy.

When he was ill, Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby insisted on buying him his provisions and even came in, regardless of his protests, in order to tidy up for him. On such occasions he would treat her with extreme insolence; he ordered her out, ranted at her, and lapsed into sulks when she refused to be moved. Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby was a woman who felt her responsibilities keenly. During his lifetime, she had always called her husband 'The Squire' when talking about him to the villagers. Later, when he had died, leaving her childless, practically penniless, the mistress

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of a mortgaged and dilapidated house and sixty odd acres, she had been quick to shoulder all the responsibilities which he himself had so consistently shirked. This was really more satisfactory. He had been the best of husbands, she had no complaints against him, but he had never been fully conscious of what he owed to his position. She herself had no doubts on that score.

It was through Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby that Mona first came to visit the summer-house. Mona lived in one of the cottages scattered about the Sweet-Hannaby 'estate', her father was a bus-driver and her mother worked for Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby. Mona was thirteen, and had one more term at school. After that she was going into service, not because she wished to, she would like to work on a farm, but because Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby said that that was the best thing for a girl.

Mona was strong and healthy, with a clear skin, red cheeks and thick blonde hair, fastened at either side with clips of tortoise-shell. Her legs were always bare, even in winter, and Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby used to get her to pick her apples for her, she was so good at climbing trees.

One afternoon Mona brought the washing round to 'the big house' on her brother's bicycle. Mr. Sweet-Hannaby didn't think it quite proper for a girl of her age to ride round the country like that, her skirt rucked up on the crossbar, but she refrained from saying so, because for one thing she was again short of money and could not pay for the washing, and for another she wanted Mona to do an errand for her. She had forgotten to take Captain Manson's provisions down to the summer-house, and he was now waiting for them. She gave Mona the basket.

It was a damp, misty day. The trees dripped water

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on to Mona as she bicycled down the path which led to the summer-house; her bare legs felt clammy. She had never spoken to Captain Manson, though once or twice when she had been out birds-nesting she had passed him, on a solitary walk. He had never looked at her, though she had smiled; he walked past, very erect, his eyes fixed in front of him, and she could see how white the skin was where it was stretched across his jaw-bone.

She didn't feel exactly nervous now, but she began to rehearse what she should say to him. "I've brought your groceries, sir." "Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby asked me to bring . . ." "Here are your groceries, sir . . ." She jammed on her brakes, skidded to a stop before the green-painted door of the summer-house, and dismounted like a boy. As she knocked, she felt a curious pang, the sort of shiver which makes one say that someone is walking over one's grave.

She could hear a dry, endless coughing from within, but no one answered. She rapped again, with her whole fist.

"Who's that?"

She gave a start; the voice sounded so unfriendly. "Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby sent me. I've brought your things, sir."

There was no reply to this, so again she hammered on the door. "Come in, come in!" the voice bawled. "For God's sake, stop that noise. Do you want to knock the whole place down?"

"I'm very sorry, sir." Mona entered with the basket, hesitantly, because she now saw that Captain Manson was in bed.

He lay beneath an army blanket, his knees drawn up, one hand under his cheek. The eyes that he fixed on her were red-rimmed and unnaturally bright, his

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cheeks were moist and flushed. She stood for a moment staring at him, the basket held in both of her hands. She expected him to say something, but he only gazed at her, as if she had no business there, with those bright red-rimmed eyes of his.

"Where shall I put the things, sir?" she asked eventually.

He pointed to the table, she crossed towards it and set down the basket. All the time he watched her, without saying a word. On her way back to the door she noticed that the fire was almost out, there was only the ash and one or two glowing fragments of wood. She hesitated. "Shall I make up the fire for you, sir?"

"No, thank you."

"It'll be out in a moment, sir." She was already bending over it, the poker in her hand.

"Leave it!" he shouted at her, in sudden rage. "Didn't you hear what I said? Leave it!"

Dropping the poker in fright, so that it made a loud clatter, she swung round. He had begun to cough, after the exertion of shouting at her. "I'll see to it myself," he got out between spasms. "I have to get up to feed the animals. Go away. Go away." He put a hand under his pillow and produced a small bottle, into which he spat. Then once more he was lacerated by the same dry coughing, his whole body shaking and convulsed, the tears running down his hot cheeks.

"But you mustn't get up, sir," Mona said. "I'll feed the animals. I can easily feed the animals."

The coughing had ceased; he lay back, gasping for breath. In a dry, harsh voice he said: "If I want you to do anything for me, I'll ask you. Otherwise you can mind your own business. You can go now." He took a handkerchief and wiped his forehead and his cheeks.

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Mona went out without a word.

Half an hour later she returned, her arms full of dead wood. "I've seen to the animals, sir," she said calmly. She had given a brief knock and then entered, without waiting for an answer.

"You've *what!*!" He half sprang out of bed, throwing off his blanket and revealing his creased pyjamas and thin freckled legs. "Damn you! What do you think you're doing? Didn't you hear what I said? Clear out! I don't want you here! I suppose Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby . . . "

Mona did not answer; she was too absorbed in building up the fire.

After that, she went to the summer-house every day. Fortunately the holidays had started, so when she wasn't helping her mother there were brief periods when she could get away from home. If anyone asked her where she was going, she made some excuse. It was not that she was ashamed of visiting Captain Manson—why should she be?—but she felt that perhaps her mother or her father might object. She had so often heard them use that adjective 'odd' when talking about the Captain. In any case, this was her secret; she felt a little possessive, and other people, if they knew, might try to supersede her.

When she entered the summer-house on the day following her first visit, Captain Manson shouted at her: "What, you again! I thought I'd told you I wouldn't have you here. Get out! Clear out!"

"Sh-sh!" she quietened him. "You're having your bedclothes off." She bent over, straightened the blankets, and tucked them in for him.

"Leave me alone," he snapped. "I don't want you here. What the hell do you think you're doing? I can manage quite easily."

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"You're ill," she put in, filling a copper full of water and placing it on the fire. She rolled up her sleeves, preparatory to washing up, revealing arms which were firm, white and strong.

"You've got a nerve," he said. "Christ, you've got a nerve. Who do you think owns this place? Who do you think's going to pay you?"

"No one."

"No one! You're wasting your time on me, I tell you. You won't catch me chucking money at you . . ."

But she took no notice of his ratings. He spluttered and fumed when she brought a tin basin and a ewer of warm water to his bedside; but in the end she got her way and washed his face and his hands. It was she who milked the two goats and took a hook and cut green-stuff for the rabbits. As she worked, she used to hum a song to herself. She had a clear tuneful voice. "Oh, stop that caterwauling!" he shouted at her, when he first heard it.

"Don't you like music?"

"Do you call that music?"

But no offensiveness could ruffle her composure, and when next day she moved about her jobs in silence, he asked: "No singing today? What's the matter with you?"

"I thought you didn't like it."

"I don't. But you haven't shown much regard for my wishes so far." She was still silent, and he shouted at her: "Go on! Sing! Sing!" He was rewarded a few minutes later by the sound of her voice, floating to him through the window, as she milked the goats. Weak and gasping for breath, he hoisted himself up so that he could look out of the window. He could just see her, kneeling beside one goat, her hands rhythmical, her blonde hair screening her face. He

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suffered a momentary twinge, somewhere deep inside himself. He could not explain it.

Slowly his manner towards her changed. He ceased to greet her with jibes and taunts and sarcasms. Instead, he smiled at her and said "Hello," he seemed to look forward to her coming. No one had ever seen him smile before; his smile made him less stern, he ceased to look like a bilious schoolboy, his skin did not have that tight, stretched appearance. When he said "You again!" at her entrance, it was more with relief or pleasure than with the old rancour.

The winter was approaching: it was dark sometimes when Mona left the summer-house, and there had been heavy frosts. His temperature remained obstinate. Often in his diary he had to make the entry "Rusty sputum." The berries were very profuse that year; Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby predicted a hard winter. Her sister wanted her to go out to Alassio to her, but she couldn't afford the journey. She couldn't leave the house and how would the Women's Institute and the Girl Guides and the Parish Council manage without her?

One morning, Mona arrived with a kitten buttoned up in her overcoat. She had found a boy drowning it, and had given him sixpence for it. As she bicycled the creature purred against her breast. It gave her a strange pang, like that which she experienced when she had first knocked on the door of the summer-house.

"I've brought you a present," she announced when she went in.

"A present? What is it?"

She dropped the kitten on to the end of his bed. He put out a hand, stroked it and then coaxed it towards him. "Is this for me?" he asked.

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She nodded. "Thought it would be company like."

"But you ought to keep it yourself."

She gave a low chuckle. "Father don't like cats. None of them do—'cept me. They wouldn't have that kitten, not if you paid them to."

Captain Manson picked up the animal and held it against his cheek. He stared at her, not with that old hostility, but thoughtfully, even sadly. It made her feel uncomfortable, she turned her back to him.

Suddenly she heard an exclamation. "Oh, its suffocating me! I can't breathe!" There was a thud. The kitten lay under the bedside table.

She ran across to it, ricked it up and held it to her breast. It mewed plaintively, its whole body was trembling. "Why did you do that?" she asked passionately.

"It isn't hurt."

"But why?" she repeated. "Why?"

"I've told you. It was suffocating me."

"You might have killed it," she said.

"Don't be a fool!"

"Poor kitty," she crooned. "Poor, poor kitty."

"Oh, shut up!" he exclaimed. "Oh, stop that sentimental drivell!"

He turned away angrily from her. He waited. But he heard no sound of her getting up, she said nothing. He felt vaguely sick. He wanted to strike her or tell her to clear out. He raised himself on his elbow.

What he saw jarred him like a blow. She was looking at him, still on her knees beside his bed, the kitten was held against her breast, tears trickled down her cheeks. She made no sound. It was the silentness of her grief that moved him; he had never seen anyone weep like that before, no muscle moved. The tears splashed

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downwards on to her cotton frock, the kitten and her own hands.

He put out a hand and touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me. Please forgive me." He drew her tear-stained face towards his own aching chest.

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby had not visited the summer-house for several days. She had been to London, where she had stayed at Bailey's Hotel. When she came in, she looked round her in astonishment. Then she shook a finger at Captain Manson: "Oh, you bad man," she said.

"Why, what's the matter now?" he asked surly.

"You've been doing far too much. The place looks like a show-room. I suppose you've been hopping in and out of bed. . . . My word! Look at this frying-pan. I can see my face in it. Well, you are a wonder, and no mistake. But it's very, very naughty of you. Just so long as you have this temperature, you *must* take things easy."

For a brief while Captain Manson had thought that Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby knew about Mona. He now turned away from her, and faced the wall. "Do you mind," he said. "I'm feeling rather tired."

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby burst into peals of laughter. She had the gift of turning into a joke anything that was in the least disagreeable to her. "Oh, you!" she exclaimed. "I don't know why I bother with you. Still—that's what men are like."

The bed creaked as she sat down on it. Captain Manson groaned.

But Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby was an observant woman. When she left the summer-house she saw bicycle-tyre marks in the soft mud of the path. They puzzled her, because she knew that Captain Manson never had any visitors. It might be the postman, of course. But

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letters came only once in months, and these marks crossed and re-crossed many times.

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby resolved to find out who this visitor could be. She had always prided herself on knowing everything that happened on the 'estate'; and for that reason it was galling to discover that something had been going on under her very nose of which she had been ignorant.

One evening Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby saw Mona cut through the orchard and then down towards the summer-house. Mona! She would never have believed it.

Next day when Mona's mother had laid the table for lunch, and was on her way out of the back-door, Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby called her back. "Oh, Mrs. Atkins, Mrs. Atkins, I just wanted a word with you."

She had already rehearsed what to say. She asked Mrs. Atkins to sit down, which she did very gingerly, on one of the straight-backed chairs. Then she said that she had happened, just happened, to notice that Mona sometimes visited Captain Manson. "I suppose you know that?" she said.

"Oh, no."

"Oh," she smoothed her skirt over her thighs with plump hands. "Well, I'm sure there's no harm in it. But I do think—well, Mona's at a very impressionable age. You know what girls are. And Captain Manson—well, I don't like saying anything against him—but he *is*—odd. You know what I mean."

Mrs. Atkins nodded. She knew what she meant.

"I shouldn't make too much of this," Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby continued. "Just tell Mona, quite kindly, that you really think it would be better if she ceased to visit Captain Manson. She's a good, obedient girl. I'm sure she'll understand." Then, seeing a look of

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doubt on Mrs. Atkins' face, she said, "If you like, I'll—"

"Oh, no, thank you, m'm," Mrs. Atkins put in, jealous of her privileges. "I'll tell her."

But the trouble was Mr. Atkins. He disliked Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby. When he drove his bus and she tried to stop it outside the Hall gates, where there was no bus stop, he drove past without taking any notice of her. He refused her a subscription for the R.S.P.C.A. Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby said that he had ideas above his station. She said that he was Bolshie.

"Interfering old cow!" he exclaimed when his wife told him about Mona. "What's it got to do with her? I'm damned if I'll do what she tells me to do."

But Jim, Mona's brother, took his mother's side. He was seventeen and had won a scholarship to a Technical College. He wore a tight black suit, with all three coat-buttons fastened. His hair was parted in the centre, above a greasy forehead, and smoothed down with hair-cream as thick as glue. He had strained his eyes from too much reading, and wore gold-rimmed glasses.

"Mum's right," he said. "It's not decent for a girl. It's not decent. That bloke's half off his rocker, if you ask me. You never know with a bloke like that."

Eventually Mum and Jim persuaded Mr. Atkins to have a word with Mona. "Now see here, my girl," he began, while Jim helped Mum with the washing-up in the kitchen. They were both careful not to clatter the plates, so that they could hear what was going on. "Your mum's been getting at me with some story about your going up to see that Captain Manson." He spoke in an embarrassed and half-hearted way, and received no encouragement from Mona. At the end he said: "Well, that's all, my girl. Now let's not hear

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anything more of these 'ere visits, eh?" He gave her a playful slap on the bottom. Mona said nothing. She did not smile.

"Could 'ave done better meself," Mum whispered derisively to Jim.

The next day Mona walked to the summer-house. She went a long way round, through some woods and over ploughed fields. The woods rather frightened her, they were dark and smelled of rotting vegetation. But the sight of the candles burning in the summer-house raised her spirits. Captain Manson was better that day; he was sitting up, with his trench-coat over his shoulders, and on the table before him was a half-finished schooner. He was sewing the sails.

Mona had not seen the ship before. "Did you make that?"

He grunted in affirmation.

"It's wonderful"

He took her hand in his, and gave it a slight pressure. She felt a catching of her breath. "May I help?" she asked.

"Of course."

She stayed much longer than she had intended. They sat on either side of the table, with the candles between them. Mona had taken over the sewing of the sails, while he sandpapered the keel. Sometimes their hands met over the work, or they both smiled at each other. Neither of them spoke.

When she left, it was dark, with a few stars pricking the frosty sky. She was rather afraid of the walk home, she almost went back through the orchard and down the main road, but she thought that someone might see her, and in the end she set off across the deep furrows. The mud kept on caking her shoes, so that her feet felt clumsy and leaden; the air hurt her lungs,

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but she felt wonderfully happy; she looked up at the sky, vast and blue and mysterious, with a thin slice of moon, and at the distant woods, and sometimes backwards, at the lights of the summer-house.

When she at last came to the woods, she hesitated and felt a quickening of the pulse. They seemed so dark and so enormous. In the daylight one thought nothing of them, they were small and littered with newspapers, but now the trees seemed to soar upwards, upwards for ever, and the path gleamed like a bright needle, and then lost itself, miles and miles ahead.

Dry twigs crackled under her feet and an owl hooted. Her heart was knocking against her breast-bone. She made herself think of other things. She thought of the schooner they were making—it would be very beautiful—and then she thought of slow rivers and sails and the blue of distant oceans. She no longer felt afraid. She could not explain what she felt, but it was very wonderful. She knew that she could now do whatever she wished to do and no one could prevent her.

Suddenly a figure appeared before her. She gave a little scream. "Jim!"

"I thought that you'd been to see him. I knew it."

He had caught her arm roughly. "Leave me alone," she said. She struggled to get away.

"Bitch! Bitch! Harlot!" he screamed in a sudden rage. Raising his fist, he struck her in the mouth. Then, frightened, he let her go. Mona took to her heels.

At home, she sat silent and cold and sullen, holding a handkerchief to her bleeding lips, while Mum and Jim railed at her. Her father sat behind yesterday's newspaper, puffing at his pipe. Sometimes he would break in: "Oh, let her be, can't you? For Christ's sake, let her alone."

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Jim said: "To think it was on my bike she visited him. And me not knowing. There's deceit for you. Night after night she borrowed that bicycle . . ." There were tears in his eyes.

At last Mum tried to make Mona promise, on the Bible, that she would never go up to the summer-house again. But Mona shook her head; she was strong enough for them. Then Mrs. Atkins lost her temper. "I'll teach you! You're no daughter of mine!" She hit out at Mona, pulled her hair, and kicked her.

Mona did not resist. It was her father who rescued her. "Ere, what do you think you're doing? Leave the girl alone, will you? What's the matter with you?" He pulled Mrs. Atkins away roughly, she burst into tears, and threw her arms about him. "What 'ave I done to deserve all this?" she got out between sobs.

"Now see! Now see 'ow you've upset Mum," Jim admonished Mona.

The next day Mrs. Atkins confided in Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby. Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby looked grave: "I'd never have thought it of Mona," she said. "I am surprised."

"And me bringing her up so well and all," Mrs. Atkins put in.

"Ah, well," Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby sighed over the unexpectedness of things. "One never can tell. You must be thankful that Jim's such a good boy to you."

She then gave some advice to Mrs. Atkins. "Mona must go away," she said, "for the two weeks before term starts. I'm sure the change will bring her back to her senses. In any case, she will be out of harm's way. I have just the right place in mind."

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby knew the wife of the rector of a parish an odd twenty miles away. The girl who worked for her had caught scarlatina.

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"She's a kind but firm woman and a dear friend of mine. I know she'll keep an eye on Mona. She's wonderful with difficult girls."

Mrs. Atkins was not certain whether she liked this description of Mona. But the idea seemed first-rate. Mona was to get two-and-six a week pocket money, with board and lodging.

The next day Captain Manson was less well. His temperature had risen, he had difficulty in breathing, his voice was a hoarse whisper. But when he saw Mona he greeted her with the same pleasure that he always showed. Mona responded listlessly. She moved about her jobs, silent and with downcast eyes. Her mother had spoken to her that morning.

"What's the matter?" Captain Manson asked eventually.

"Nothing." She pursed her lips together.

"Nonsense. There's something up."

"It's nothing, I tell you."

"Oh, come off it!" He caught her arm as she hurried past the bed. "Tell me."

He gazed into her face, but she would not look at him. "Mona!" he said. He gave her arm a shake. Then she turned, the tears welling from her eyes. "They're going to send me away," she said.

"Who's going to send you away?"

She told him what her mother had said to her that morning. "It's Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby," she exclaimed passionately. "She's behind it all."

"Interfering old bitch! Damn her! Damn her!" He banged his fist on the wall against his bed. "But you needn't do what she says."

"If Mum says I must go, I must go."

"But why?" he exclaimed, in exasperation.

"I must."

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“Why, why?”

“Oh, don’t let’s talk about it.”

“But, Mona——”

“Please, please don’t talk about it. It doesn’t do any good. It’ll only be two weeks.”

He was going to protest, but then checked himself. Although she was so young, there was something indomitable about her. She would do what she thought she ought to do, whatever one said. He sighed, and reached for the schooner which lay on the table beside him. There was a silence, except for the scrape of sand-paper on wood.

When Mona had finished her jobs about the house, she came and sat down beside him on the bed and helped him with the work. “Do you think we’ll finish it tonight?” she asked.

“Should do.”

She did not say anything further. She worked with a strained intensity. Every now and then he looked up at her, pausing in his work, and admired the deftness of her hands. The candle made a fringe of shadow on her cheeks; her cheeks gleamed where there were still tears on them.

At last the ship was finished, they both stared at it, without speaking, for a long time, and Mona ran a finger over the smooth keel. “It’s a beauty,” she said. “Where shall I put it?”

“Oh, anywhere.”

“Shall I put it on the mantelpiece?”

He looked at the place she indicated. There was a tobacco tin, a jar with some spills in it, and a small snapshot in a cheap gilt frame. “All right,” he said.

She picked up the schooner, very gently, and walked across the room, and placed it beside the

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photograph. "There!" she said. She stood back to admire it, passing her handkerchief from one hand to the other. "Now I must go."

"Must you? Not yet, Mona. Stay a little longer," he pleaded with her.

She shook her head. "Good-bye," she said. She went to his bedside and put out her hand. He hesitated a moment and then took it, and raised it to his lips. "Good-bye, Mona," he said. "I shall miss you."

"Silly! It's no time at all. Two weeks."

"Two weeks!"

She drew her hand out of his and went to the door. Turning, she smiled at him: "Take care of yourself. Let Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby do things for you."

"Her! I'd sooner die."

She made a small, choking sound. "You mustn't talk like that." She shrugged her shoulders in her white mackintosh, drew on her gloves and went out.

"Mona!" he called after her, in sudden panic. "Mona! Must you—can't you—?"

"Yes?" she asked, returning.

"Oh, nothing."

Again she said good-bye. He heaved himself up to look out of the window at her as she walked away. There was a fog, he had not noticed it before; it curled round the apples in the orchard and made the laurels outside the porch drip noisily. The sight of it made him cough once more, and as Mona disappeared into it, it made him feel hopeless and sad and at a loss. It made him long for he knew not what; it pricked his nostril like some scent, bringing with it memories and dead desires.

He got out of bed, placing one bare foot after the other on to the cold concrete, and running his hand along the bedrail, steadied himself sufficiently to cross

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to the mantelpiece. He took down the snapshot and stared at it for a long time. It showed his friend, who had died so long ago, at Davos, in a pair of white shorts, sunbathing on a terrace. It had been taken two months before his death and one would not think that the blond young man, smiling at one, would so soon be buried.

Still with the photograph in his hands he dragged himself back to bed. He drew his knees up, and felt the cold touch of the metal on his breast, and from his throat broke dry, excruciating sobs.

The next day, at six o'clock, the time that Mona had usually appeared, the door opened and closed again. Captain Manson put a hand to his eyes, as if to shade them. "Mona!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

But without answering his question, she ran across to the bedside. "What's happened?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, this," he said. He had had a haemorrhage. "I'm sorry."

"Hadn't I better get a doctor?"

"No, no," he exclaimed. "Certainly not. I won't see a doctor." At Davos they had operated on his lung, under a local anaesthetic. He had suffered the *pneumato* shock. "I'm all right," he said. His voice was no more than a whisper now. "It's happened before. In fact, I feel much better now. No pain, no congestion. Just rather light-headed and weak."

Hurriedly Mona undid her mackintosh, and threw her hat into the chair. She filled the copper with water, and fetched some disinfectant, and then came to his bedside and began to clean up. Nothing had been said by either of them through all this bustle, but Captain Manson's eyes, unnaturally large now, had never left her.

MONA

As she washed his hands in the warm soapy water, he suddenly said: "What are you doing here? I thought you had gone. I didn't expect you."

She smiled, but still said nothing.

"We said good-bye," he murmured, frowning as he tried to bring yesterday's incidents back into his mind. His fever had made him unsure of things.

"Didn't you go after all?" he said.

"Oh, I went all right. There's my suitcase." She pointed to the cheap bag which she had put down in the doorway, and gave a low chuckle. "Pa saw me off, and bought me my ticket. But—here I am!"

"What did you do, Mona?"

"It was easy," she said, with a hint of pride in her voice. "Easy as pie. I got out at Colchester, see—that was the next stop—and I went along to the post office and sent a telegram, 'Mona unable to come. Writing.' I signed it 'Sweet-Hannaby.' Then I got into the next train back and came along here."

"Writing? But when no letter comes——"

"Oh, they'll find out in the end," Mona conceded. "But it's Saturday today, so they won't expect a letter until Monday, now, will they? And then they'll think there's been some delay, see——"

"But what are you going to do in the meantime?"

She laughed. "Stay with you, silly!"

"Stay with me! But, damn it all——"

"You're ill, aren't you? And you won't see the doctor. I can't leave you here all by yourself."

"Now look here, Mona——"

But it was useless to argue with her. She simply shook her head, smiling that smile of hers, and he was feeling tired; the room kept swinging, as if he were on board ship, and he could not always hear what she was saying to him.

FRANCIS KING

Eventually he seemed to lapse into a sleep. She sat on the chair beside him, his greatcoat over her shoulders, and watched his face. It looked strained and tense and unlike the face of someone in repose. She sat there for a long time. He began to mutter, and toss and turn, and once he cried out a name. She put her hand on his forehead, and then she took a handkerchief and wiped the sweat away. Once, when he began mumbling something, as if in uncontrollable fear, she went down and whispered into his ear: "Sh! It's nothing. There's nothing to be afraid of." Her voice seemed to calm him.

She thought about whether she ought to get the doctor. But she knew that he had said that he did not wish to see him; she remembered his panic when she had suggested it. Perhaps, also, she realised that there was nothing left that a doctor could do. She sat beside him, and all of a sudden it seemed as if he were slipping away from her, slipping away, gently but remorselessly, and nothing she could do or say would bring him back.

She got up to put new candles in the candlesticks, but as soon as she left his side he called out: "Mona! Don't leave me. Mona, where are you?"

"Here. I'm here," she said. "I'm changing the candles."

"Give me your hand, Mona. I think I'm dying."

"Don't talk like that! You mustn't talk like that."

She took his hand, hot and moist with fever. Then she began crying in that strange way of hers, the large tears falling down her cheeks, without any movement of the muscles. "You're crying," he said. "Don't cry, Mona."

She did not answer. But all the time that she stayed beside him the tears fell silently.

MONA

He had one other moment of lucidity. "Mona," he said breathlessly. "Mona."

"Yes." She put her head down to him, it was so difficult to hear. "Yes."

"It's all yours, Mona. Take whatever you want. It's all yours. There's no one else."

"You mustn't talk like that," she repeated between choking sobs.

"Funny. I might never have existed," he mused. "For all these last twenty years I might have been dead. Silence and emptiness—that's all. Nothing."

"Sh!" she said. "Sh!" She wanted to tell him what she felt, but she could not put it into words, and she was not certain what it was. But she gave a brief pressure to his hand. "It's all right," she said. "It's all been all right."

Three hours later she heard a strange and terrible noise. It was the death-rattle. She ran out and stumbled up the path to Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby's house. Briars tore her bare legs, because she could not see where she was going. She tugged at the bell, and hammered at the door.

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby's head appeared at the landing window. She was wearing a chin-strap. "What is it?" she said, in a voice made high-pitched and thin by nervousness.

"It's me, m'm," said Mona. "Oh, m'm, Captain Manson—"

"Mona! What *are* you doing here? What does this mean?"

Ignoring the question, Mona said: "Captain Manson, m'm. I think he's dying. He's that ill."

"Wait a minute." The window slammed shut.

Everything happened very quickly then. Mona's mother was sent for, and Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby rang

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up the doctor. They all hurried down to the summer-house, and did what they could. In the confusion, no one thought any more of Mona.

"He's dead, I'm afraid," the doctor said. He felt sleepy and cross. "It's a miracle to me how he kept alive so long. I shouldn't have thought it possible."

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Atkins.

Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby began to cry.

At that moment Mona came in. "Mona!" exclaimed her mother. "Mona!"

"What do you want?" said Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby. "You can't come in here."

"You should be ashamed," said Mrs. Atkins.

"How dare you!" said Mrs. Sweet-Hannaby.

Without giving them a word or a glance, Mona crossed to the mantelpiece and took down the schooner. "It's mine," she said quietly. She put it under her arm and walked out.

Alan Beesley

PINK SLIPPERS

I DO not know why I smiled.

It may have been that I was lonely and tired with travel and that the quick warmth of the room cheered me. It may have been that this November afternoon, with its bright, defiant sunlight and grey snow clouds, had stirred some memory from my past and that I smiled to cover the shock and the sureness of its awakening. Perhaps the thickness of a laugh, or the golden flowers on the polished table, or the shadow beneath the cheek of a girl, reminded me of my home and saddened and reassured me. But I think that beyond any of these nuances, it was that I was amused by the pink slippers of my hostess. I remember that they lay in a pool of sunlight and seemed so permanent, so sure, that it was as if the room had been built around them. Then one of them moved out slowly from the bright circle. I looked up, already smiling, to their owner, Carol, the daughter of my father's friend.

A thousand small details combined to give significance to this moment. Caught in a thin ray of sunlight we remained smiling at each other. Colourless particles

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of dust, whirling in spirals, flowed up the shaft in a pale stream: my shoe lace had unloosed and straggled across the floor; the girl's hands were motionless by her side. It was nearly evening and the day had been drained of all colour. The room was stilled, as though all motion had been riveted into suspense by this one shaft of now lifeless sunlight. There had been dancing before I entered, but now it had stopped. I could hear no conversation. In this frozen instant, as I looked at Carol, I knew that the illusion of love had flickered between us.

I choose illusion to mean a shadow, a reflection, a whisper, a wish and I imply nothing false, nothing of deliberate trickery. I knew that without my intention or specific desire, this situation had been placed before me. I distrusted the melodramatic setting for its opening, yet I realised that my vanity would probably prevail, for I knew that Carol liked and was willing to love me.

I have felt the stillness in a room many times since this incident, been trapped by the same dead sun, held back by the colour of a girl's hair. I have known this situation again, watched the betrayal. And with this recurrent theme, so many subsequent variations have been associated that it is impossible to place them in their true context. They have slid back to an earlier emotion, been grafted so firmly upon the original stratum that they have become an integral part of it. Consequently, it is impossible for me to determine whether my foreboding existed at the time or whether I have manufactured it since, whether instinct spoke or whether its voice was created only by later events. It is more pleasing for me to think that throughout our early meetings, whilst I watched and felt the development of our relationship, I was aware of the seeds of its

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death already stirring. Certainly, even if such suspicions were true, they did not affect me or divert me from my wish. I was completely satisfied with the pleasure our early meetings gave to me.

I liked Carol and we had many mutual interests. However, I can remember nothing of our conversation. All that I can recall are the irrelevant details that strengthened the bond between us. Grotesque, obscure symbols, they survive.

I remember that one night, as we walked by the small river near her house, we saw a huge bird rise from the water, float in front of us, and alight in a field by our side. There it stood with outstretched wings. We never knew what kind of bird it was, but I can recall that it was a moonlit night and that small, stubby trees jutted along the river bank. This incident was sufficient to bind me to Carol long after I had ceased to feel the least emotion towards her. This and similar trivialities created an intimacy between us that I was unable to break or withstand.

Far more traceable are the ripples that flowed from the small town in which she lived, and which, at an early date, had embraced us in its protection.

At first, it gave me a feeling of pride and security to succumb to the benevolent and approving regard of its inhabitants, who watched our courtship with indulgence and encouragement. A special table was always reserved for us at the restaurant where we ate. The confectioner used to save the most sugared cakes for us. In short, then, I was flattered by their interest. Now I can see that evil little town with more clarity.

I was a stranger to the South and regarded its insularity and prejudice as praiseworthy single-mindedness. I thought that its unending concern with the private life of the individual was evidence of its public

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spiritedness. And, believing this, I was grateful to have become an accepted member of its community so quickly. I was asked to write an article for the local paper. I admired the democratic spirit of the people, for though Carol's father was one of the richest land-owners of the district, there was neither deference nor envy in the attitude of the townsfolk. I liked them and regarded myself as one of them. I even presided at a series of meetings designed to improve the housing settlements of negroes who lived in the western quarter of the town.

I would have continued indefinitely the easy, effortless relationship that existed between Carol and myself, but towards the beginning of Spring it became apparent that the town regarded me with less enthusiasm than it had formerly proclaimed. I first noticed a precision in the regard of its inhabitants, an increased watchfulness and concern. They continued to invite me to their homes, but their politeness was uneasy and their kind words too mechanical to please me. By a series of hints they showed that, whereas they respected my hesitation as modesty and good-breeding, this could be carried to excess and that I should clarify my intentions towards Carol by a formal proposal of marriage.

I was staying at a small hotel, built of timber, and with an air of homeliness which I had previously found appealing. I returned one day and watched its wooden walls converge upon me.

I had not considered marrying Carol, but now I knew that it was inevitable. Again a succession of small details had combined together to demand it. A spotlight that had singled us out at a local dance, a flower pinned to Carol's coat by a seller in the market, the city newspaper, ordered especially for me on

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Sunday when I used to breakfast with her family, all had cast this spell over me. So many discreet coughs, silences and pauses, nudges and smiles; so much laughter, so many kind words, had linked us together, had glazed the set purpose of the town from my recognition. Now, I saw it clearly. The town was sterile and dying and was determined that it should prolong its life by our marriage. I knew that I should be forced by the care and regard which I must hold for my future relations, to make my home within its vicinity. The city from which I came seemed a dim but very desirable memory. I thought with longing of the lights of its streets, of its noise, of its impersonality.

I opened my window and looked out to the street below. This was the main thoroughfare and the lights from the windows of the café's and drugstores still shone, though the hour was late. A boy lounging on a bicycle, pointlessly and alone, emphasised the emptiness of the street. I could hear the beat of a radio pounding heavily towards me from the nearest café. It had begun to snow and fast flakes were driving straight up the street. I had a sudden picture of Carol as I had seen her at one of our first meetings. She had been wearing a brown fur hood, the snow was falling, the street deserted. We had run into a café, shaken off the snow from our coats and later we had danced. I tried to reject this picture but it persisted before me. I shut the window, but the music crept through the walls.

I knew that I had realised for a long time that Carol had been surprised and probably hurt by my inaction. I had dismissed the thought; indeed, it had given me a little spurt of satisfaction to watch how well she concealed her obvious anxiety. Now, I despised myself. I saw how difficult it was for her. The town had secured its position by its jealous and watchful possessiveness.

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Its code was based upon the inevitability of a relationship planned between boy and girl during schooldays. It had supervised their constancy. Carol had already offended by avoiding such contracts, but now there was to be no escape. I knew that I must propose marriage the next morning and tried hard to convince myself that this was what I wished.

We became engaged and the town relaxed its watch. It was considered unnecessarily extravagant that I should continue to live at the hotel and I moved my belongings to her father's house.

Everyone was very kind to me and I was assured that I was already regarded as a son of the house. I liked and respected Carol and she attracted me. At first, the new intimacy of living so near to her lulled my doubts and I told myself that I was very fortunate. This was to be a preview of my married life. A series of pictures were presented to me that were at once domestic enough to show me the comfort of home life and at the same time sufficiently romantic to prove that it would not be dull.

It may seem from my writing that I consider this to have been a deliberate plan. It was not. Now, I regard it as a delaying action, for besides establishing an inescapable intimacy, it fortified an emotion which had died, however unaware I might be of its death.

At first, I enjoyed the laziness of the life that I was now leading. It was pleasant to have breakfast each morning alone with Carol and I used to like driving into town together, to shop, to dine, or to visit friends. I regarded my former suspicions of the town as unjust, so amiable had it become towards me.

But before long I had begun to wish that I might be alone for some of the day. Carol would always display a new dress or a hat which she had just purchased,

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and I became aware that I had to force myself to display an interest which I could not feel. It became a strain to listen to her father's conversation at meal-times. I could summon neither a smile for his jokes nor a sigh for his complaints. And if ever I wished to walk in the hills, there was always someone, young brother, cousin or Carol herself, ready to accompany me. I found that I had little to say and was becoming irritated by tiny mishaps. Though hating myself, I chose to hurt Carol. I would misinterpret her words, force a quarrel and only from her eventually unhappy face and perhaps her tears could I derive satisfaction. This in its turn soon changed to a mingling of shame, pity and hatred, both of myself and of her. But she was understanding about such incidents and attributed their cause to the suspense which I was undergoing. And I was prepared to accept this explanation.

I awoke one day with the certain knowledge that not only did I not want to marry Carol, but that I had no desire to see or talk to her again. Although I felt relief, even exhilaration, that at last I had fully and openly admitted this thought, it still appalled me. But beyond this I knew that in no way could I alter my conviction. I had but one desire—to leave the town at once. But I knew that I had committed myself so deeply that this was impossible. I argued with myself that there was only one test, that if I did not wish to marry the girl, then obviously I should not. I told myself that gallantry was quixotic and foolish, but to no effect. I knew that I did not wish to marry and I was certain equally that I could not avoid it. Every plan I made to save myself was confronted by sentimental images and anticipation of the misery my desertion would have upon Carol. Now I believe that she had guessed at least some of my sentiments and that, being unwilling

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to accept them as truth, was forced to deny their existence. Consequently, whereas I was forced to behave unkindly to her, she was obliged to ignore my rudeness by pretending to herself that she had not perceived it.

It now made me weary and sick to continue to hurt her and I determined that I must make the best of the situation. But I knew that I could not manufacture emotion at will and there was an added difficulty in that she no longer held any attraction for me, and the thought of the eventual physical relationship filled me with dismay. Yet I had to marry Carol and to pretend that I wanted to do so. At home I should have received moral support from sympathetic friends to whom I could have explained the predicament and who would have salved my conscience with their insistence that marriage based upon such an attitude was impossible. Isolated in this town, watched, influenced, I could only dismiss the wish that continually assailed me, that somehow Carol would disappear from my life. I refused to allow the thought to develop.

One morning, when the snow had ceased to fall, I went downstairs to find the house empty. I could hear noise in the street and, alarmed, I ran to the centre of the town. A crowd of townsfolk had gathered and as I approached it became silent. I asked what had occurred but no one would answer. They shuffled and refused to look at me until their anger overcame their embarrassment and I was overwhelmed by their vehemence.

The night before Carol had been to a party at the house of some friends who lived some little way out of town. I had not wished to go and had feigned a headache, remained at home, listened to the radio. She had not returned and her father, not wishing to alarm me, had informed the sheriff but said nothing to me. A

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search party had found her body, bedraggled and assaulted, in a field not far from her home.

They were certain that the assailant was a negro and already some of them had organised a posse and dogs to hunt down the man. But I need not worry, they assured me, they would find him and hang him—in fact, I should be allowed to assist them. I decided to return home, but before I could disengage myself from them, I heard the noise of the returning posse. Above the shouting I could hear a high sobbing, which in this still air cut through the talk of the crowd near me and hushed them. The posse consisted of six men. I knew them all, but riveted to their sense of duty, their triumph, their unity, they denied me recognition, permitting themselves only a perfunctory and detached sympathy. In their midst was a short coloured man, aged about forty. His nose had been smashed with a stone, a dog had savaged his knee, his eyes stared ahead of him, fixed and without seeing. As the group came towards us, a woman, the wife of a storekeeper whom I knew well, ran forward and, holding the man's face with one hand, drew her fingers across his forehead, cutting the flesh and gouging down into his left eye. The man appeared not to notice the wound and continued to scream without change of note.

There was little doubt that he had murdered Carol; indeed, he had practically confessed to it. Some of the crowd were for hanging him that evening, it being considered the time for lynching, but a new group of people, mostly young boys, had arrived and were demanding that he should be strung up straight away. It was then that they noticed me. Jostling around me, mouths twitching, they insisted that I accompany them. A negro child was playing in the gutter with a toy boat. They decided that it must watch the execution.

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At the outskirts of the town there was a tree which, I had been told, was in Summer remarkable for the size and colour of its blossoms. These I had not seen, but Carol and I had often admired its size as we passed it on an evening walk. Three negroes had been hung upon it during the last three years. Towards it they dragged their captive. Kicked, punched until his face had lost all form and hung, red and shapeless, like an obscene fruit, he hung upon their arms. Now the crowd was silent, breathing as one, watching the rope being fixed to the tree. I cannot forget the sigh they gave as he was jerked from the ground and allowed to swing, his feet still scraping the white grass. I knew what must occur and that nothing mattered any longer. All I could feel was weariness and detachment, as though this were a scene from a film and not connected with myself. Yet despite this, I knew that the man on the tree had had at least the justification of lust, had not wanted her to die. The man who kept the drugstore, who had reserved a table so often for Carol and me, had soaked the negro in gasoline. They thrust a lighted stake into my hands and I knew that this was yet another privilege that they had bestowed upon me. I could not do it. But their roar hounded me. "He killed you. Carol, dear little Carol." They reminded me of our happiness together. In despair, sick, I prodded him upon his stomach. His shirt had come apart and the stick slid against his sweating flesh. Swinging slowly over the snow-covered ground the lighted candle dripped towards me. When I fainted it was understood that it was grief that had caused this weakness and that they sympathised and forgave me for it.

Derek Lindsay

THE UNKNOWN LAND

MY amnesia was such that at times I almost forgot that I was suffering from amnesia. However, by the exercise of a tremendous effort of will, it was sometimes possible that I could remember, and thus it was that I came to answer the following advertisement which appeared in the personal column of a daily paper: 'Well-known private detective urgently requires the services of a man who is subject to intense form of amnesia. Profitable and interesting.' An address was provided, and I knew that unless I applied immediately there would not be the slightest possibility of my remembering the details of the advertisement in an hour's time. Therefore, having marked the side of the advertisement heavily with a thick blue pencil—in order that I should not confuse it in a few minutes with the others—and keeping one eye on the newspaper in order that I should not forget the object of my journey, I sauntered out into the street, and after a number of tedious adventures which were actuated by the fact that I lost my ticket on the surface railroad system and, through trying to think what I had

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done with it, forgot my purpose in being on the train, and so got off it accordingly, and indeed might have been lost in the streets until I had been picked up by the police but that I felt in my pocket and found a folded up newspaper, which for want of anything better to do I started to read, when I noticed that an advertisement had been marked with blue pencil, and on acquainting myself with it and its terms, I thought that it must have come into my hands through the agency of a benevolent providence (for, of course, I had long since forgotten buying the paper, never mind reading the advertisement for the first time), and I determined there and then to visit the well-known detective who was advertising therein.

Now before any further mischance could have befallen me, I discovered that I was in the very street which was named in the advertisement, and also that the imposing buildings upon my left were those in which the advertiser had his chambers. Inside the entrance there was a painted signboard on which was inscribed the information that the Hawke Detective Agency was on the third floor, and therefore repeating to myself continuously the words 'third floor', I mounted the intervening flights of stairs. It was a matter of little surprise to me that by the time that I had reached the third floor, I had completely forgotten the purpose of my visit to the building. However, I wandered diligently about the passages, and looked with interest at the doors of the various offices, and at the legends which they bore upon them.

I must confess that nothing which I saw served in any way to remind me of the nature of my original intentions, and it was a considerable relief when a little later I came upon a door which was marked 'Hawke Detective Agency'. 'Surely,' said I to myself, 'it is

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the function of a detective to find out that which his client wishes to know. Therefore, if I acquaint one of the principals of this corporation with the fact that I have forgotten the reason for which I have visited this building, he will set into motion a vast and efficient machine which will serve, in due course, to elucidate my unfortunate quandary.' Accordingly I knocked upon the door of the Agency.

"Come in," said a voice. I entered.

"How do you do?" asked a keen-looking man, who was smoking a hooked pipe and who sat in a large, luxurious arm-chair.

"I don't know," I replied.

"What's your name?"

"I don't know."

"What have you come to see me about?"

I thought hard for several minutes, but had even forgotten my last resolution. "I don't know," I replied.

"Splendid. You are just the man that I am looking for. Take a seat. I am Sebastian Hawke, the well-known detective."

"Detective," quoth I, about to make for the door in terror. Instantly Mr. Hawke leapt from his chair, and in a single bound he crossed the room to the place where I was standing. "Pull yourself together," he said, as he grasped my arm with tenuous and masterful fingers.

"You have seen my advertisement in your newspaper, and have come to aid me in the promotion of a most delicate investigation."

"I haven't seen a newspaper," I replied.

"My God, man, I'm not arguing with you, I'm telling you. Now sit down and listen to me." I complied with Mr. Hawke's request. "Now," continued the well-known detective, "this is the case which I have to investigate. A client has called for my help in a very

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strange matter. He is, or originally was, one of a large family. His problem centres around the fact that each member of his family had evinced a desire that at death he or she should be cremated. Up to the present, this wish has always been acceded to; the body concerned being removed on decease to a certain crematorium for disposal in the usual way. Imagine my client's horror when, passing one day a salt mine which abuts the crematorium, he noticed a number of his deceased relatives engaged in pushing a heavy wagon of salt up a very steep slope. The sight so mortified him that he returned upon a later occasion and found them this time to be engaged in a still less desirable task, and under the supervision of the most brutal masters who did not hesitate to employ whips in the encouragement of the enterprise of my client's relatives. It was on this account that he came to see me."

The great detective became silent. I looked with interest at the taut features of his face and his cold, expressionless eyes. So intense and remarkable was his silence that it seemed to permeate each pore and muscle of his body, until I had imagined him to be dead but for the little clouds of blue smoke which were ejected in small globular puffs from between his shell thin lips. Then even these ceased, and as there was now no sign of life whatsoever, I was quietly about to leave the room. I had but half risen from my chair, however, when suddenly the life force appeared to ripple once more through the great detective and the room became charged anew with his tremendous energy. Striking a match he relit his pipe, and then continued to speak.

"You will be interested to hear," he continued, "that with a little reflection and constructive thinking I was able to perceive what had happened to my client's relatives. My theory, as I later told it to my

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client, is as follows: In the first place it is my belief that the traditional exposure of the corpse to an artificially heightened temperature—an undertaking which would precipitate a corrosive action that ultimately could not fail but to induce too marked a change in the physiognomy and general proportions of my client's relatives to permit of their easy recognition—did not take place. On the contrary, I believe that after the customary service of remembrance in the chapel of the crematorium, the coffin did not proceed to the furnace. Instead, it was opened, and I imagine that certain ill-intentioned persons were employed to remove the body, and to administer to it some injections and a good pummelling. Thus they would restore sufficient life to the corpse to enable it to survive for a number of months, during which time its energy could be exploited in the most arduous forms of unpaid labour.

"My client was most impressed by my résumé, and deeply regretted that none of his few remaining relatives appeared to be on the point of death, for he would have liked me to have investigated the whole matter from start to finish. Indeed, he even offered to advance the decease of the next most likely candidate in his family in order to expedite my inquiry into these affairs. However, such a course was rendered unnecessary owing to my having conceived of a suitable alternative, and accordingly I inserted in the newspaper the advertisement which you have seen. Doubtless you will wonder what part I have in mind for you."

"Yes, sir, I am wondering," I replied.

"It is very natural," he said, and in his tone of voice I thought that I could discern deep understanding. "The part that you will have to play is, at the outset, at any rate, a purely passive one. You have merely to pretend that you are dead. To this end, you will be con-

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veyed in a special coffin to the crematorium, and——”

“But, sir,” I said.

“Don’t interrupt,” he replied with annoyance. “You are obviously about to ask me in what way the coffin is special. I would have told you without your interjection. It is to have air holes, peep-holes, and a small supply of food and water. Similarly, it will not be secured from outside, which will make ingress and egress considerably easier.”

I was about to observe that my interruption was to have implied slightly wider objections than he had assumed, but a look in his eyes warned me to hold my peace.

“Very well, then,” he continued, “you will position yourself in the coffin with a pencil and notebook. I shall contrive some sort of service for you in the crematorium, and when your coffin has been propelled along the track at the conclusion of the ceremony, I will cause a slight diversion, during which time you will leave the coffin and secrete yourself. Then, under cover of darkness, you will make a series of investigations, the results of which you will write down in your notebook. I have already discovered that some five thousand people are cremated at this place each year, and as I believe that the same treatment is meted out to each corpse without discrimination, I am confident that you will discover a reasonably large community which exists not very far distant from the crematorium. Find out everything that you can, and when you have availed yourself of a fair amount of material, make your way back through the crematorium, and acquaint me with your gleanings. Obviously you will forget these instructions before long,” and, observing the dazed look in my eyes, he added, “in fact, I expect that you have forgotten them already; but in order to refresh

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your memory I have had a concise version of them printed upon the inside leaf of your notebook, which, in its turn, will be strapped to your hand."

"I appreciate, sir," I replied, "that your plan is ably contrived in relation to my own deficiencies of memory. Nevertheless, I can conceive of no advantage that might accrue from the fact that you should employ as your instrument one so singularly ill-adapted to any form of investigation as myself."

"That is not true; you are eminently suitable to my purpose. You see, it is not unlikely that you will be caught by the authorities of this devilish community, and subjected to the most painful questioning. The masterstroke—at least as far as I am concerned—is that as you are suffering from amnesia, you will not be able to disclose anything."

I considered the situation as objectively as possible. "But the notebook," said I, "what will happen if they should find it?"

"They will not find it," answered Mr. Hawke. "I have evolved a special plan to prevent such a contingency. Each page of the notebook, and also the cover, has been made of rice paper, which is edible. In addition you will be provided with a sample jar of the best quality honey. Now it is obvious that if you were caught, you would be confined in a cell before the investigation was begun. During this period I am quite sure that you would experience hunger. Therefore, you would spread some honey on each leaf of the rice paper with the special flat, non-tarnishing metal pencil which is fitted to the notebook, and you would eat every scrap of the evidence."

"What a masterly scheme!" I exclaimed, with a very real admiration. Mr. Hawke smiled modestly. "It's not bad, is it?" he replied. "But for all that, I would rather

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not do it," I said with some effort. "Nonsense, man; it's just right for you. In any case, you should not demur, for unquestionably it is your duty. Indeed, now that you are here, I can see no reason why the plan should not be put into immediate operation."

"I should prefer to think it over for a day or two," I replied diffidently, "besides, I imagine that you will require some time in which to make final arrangements."

"On the contrary, everything is already arranged. Under a different name I have been in communication with the officials of the crematorium, and have told them that my brother is dying, and that in consequence I require that a place be reserved for him, as I anticipate that he will snuff it at any moment. I have also prepared a coffin for you which is here in the office, and at a moment's notice I can have it despatched to the crematorium. To avoid the more traditional form of religious service, which would constitute a grave hindrance to my scheme, I have taken the liberty of representing you as being an agnostic. All that now remains for me to do is to telephone the crematorium in order to acquaint the officials with the fact that my brother, that is to say yourself, is at last dead."

I reflected upon all the horrible details with which Mr. Hawke had acquainted me, and when I thought of the evil character of the authorities of the crematorium, I marvelled at the courageous way in which the detective exposed himself to danger through his dealings with them. Whilst I was thus engaged in such considerations, Mr. Hawke got up from his chair and, pulling aside a curtain, revealed the coffin. Momentarily he appeared to be comparing its length with my own; then, taking a small jar of honey from his cupboard, he forced it into my pocket, and affixed a rice paper notebook with pencil on to my hand.

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"Let's just try it for size," he said easily enough.

"Really, I would rather not."

"Go on. It will commit you to nothing."

"But if I get in, you may force the lid down."

"That is merely an unconscious reminiscence from childhood of the manner in which Mr. Punch manages to entrap the hangman in his own noose. Such a thought does not do you credit."

"Very well," I replied apprehensively. Mr. Hawke offered me his hand and helped me into the coffin. I lay in it at full length. "It is a good fit," I observed, "can I please climb out of it now?"

Mr. Hawke could not have heard my question, for he made no answer, but removed from his pocket an antique snuff box. This he opened, but with great clumsiness overturned the article and its contents on to my face. I gave several loud sneezes. Mr. Hawke apologised and offered me his handkerchief, and because I could not hold it in my hands, which were flattened against the side of the coffin, he pressed it to my nose. I noted with interest that the handkerchief appeared to have a somewhat sickly smell, which I could not recognise owing to the defects of my memory, though in an endeavour to identify it I took several deep breaths. I must have fallen asleep, in consequence of which I was unaware of the precise nature of all that immediately followed. My head was aching a little when I awoke, and I underwent a transient attack of claustrophobia, which was occasioned by the fact that the lid of the coffin had been lowered into place. I peered through one of the peep-holes and perceived that I had now been removed from Mr. Hawke's office to what I assumed was the chapel of the crematorium, and that my coffin was resting upon a platform which was about fifteen feet long,

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one end of which led up to two small doors in the wall.

It was then that I realised that Mr. Hawke had chloroformed me, and my reaction was one of extreme chagrin. What an unfortunate impression I must have made upon the great detective that he should be driven to such measures in order to ensure my co-operation! Henceforth I intended to be more worthy of the man whom I was serving, and to this end I made no demonstration of my presence. I heard the sound of the door of the crematorium shutting, and the voice of an official asked if any visitors were to be expected. "I am the sole mourner," replied Mr. Hawke. "And is there to be no form of service whatsoever?" asked the official. "None; I regret to say that my poor brother was a pagan." The official clicked his tongue deprecatingly. "Then shall we get on with it?" "By all means, but first I should like to make a brief speech," said Mr. Hawke. The bearers, who presumably had been employed in carrying my coffin, started coughing and sniffing, but undeterred Mr. Hawke took up a position at the side of the platform. Then, taking a small metal hammer out of his pocket he hit the side of the coffin with a loud bang—ostensibly to obtain silence, but also I suspect to imply that whatever was inside the coffin was dead, otherwise it would have knocked back.

It was at that moment that I realised that Mr. Hawke had not given me the small supply of food and water which he had promised so I pushed my finger through one of the peepholes and wriggled it at him. Quickly raising the hammer once more he hit my finger a terrible blow. I screamed. "There's someone inside that coffin," said the official. "Of course there is; my poor brother," answered Mr. Hawke coolly. My finger was very painful, and I decided not to risk a recurrence. By now Mr. Hawke had commenced

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his speech, but I did not listen, for I was busily noting down his omission upon a piece of rice paper. Then folding it up neatly I wrote his name on the outside, and pushed it out of one of the peep-holes. Unfortunately, it was a peep-hole on the wrong side, and instead of the detective seeing it, it came only to the attention of the official, who suddenly pulled it forth.

"It says, Mr. Hooke," commented the latter, as he scrutinised the writing. "Is there anyone here called Mr. Hooke?"

"I expect that it's for me," said the detective, with commendable aplomb. Then, taking the missive from the official, he scrutinised its exterior, and remarked testily: "It's Hawke, not Hooke." Then opening it he read my message and realised that he had forgotten to include the comestibles. "Gentlemen," he announced, "this little gesture of remembrance is all but concluded. Will somebody please pass me my raincoat?" Then, feeling in the pocket, he produced a neat parcel of sandwiches. These last he took out of their wrapping, and placing them upon the lid of the coffin, he chopped them into long thin slices. When he had concluded this operation, he started squeezing them through the peep-holes. "This I regret to say, is an old heathen custom which my brother made me promise to observe," he explained to the bearers and to the official.

I collected the slices of sandwich eagerly inside the coffin, and was well pleased with myself until suddenly I felt my hair becoming very damp. Mr. Hawke, having finished with the sandwiches, was now pouring a large flagon of red wine through a peep-hole on the other side. "Farewell, Brother!" he suddenly shouted, and before I could quite collect my senses, the official had pressed a switch and the coffin started travelling

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along the platform towards the little doors in the wall. Mr. Hawke, in what appeared to be a touching gesture of affection, rushed to kiss the head of the coffin, but in reality it was merely a ruse by which he might whisper to me that he regretted that he had not been able to think of a sufficiently convincing diversion, and that, in consequence, it was now up to me to escape from the coffin as best I could. What a shock! I could not believe that so great a mind should have been baffled, and indeed I thought that now my last moment was approaching, for the little doors had opened and I was being propelled along the tracks out of sight, and a strong odour of burning reached my nostrils. Then the coffin was lifted from the runners and I was carried down a corridor by two men. I had an idea. Removing my tiepin I stuck it right through a peephole into the hand of the man at the top of the coffin. He howled and dropped his end, and I had barely withdrawn my bloody tiepin but that I thought my neck had been dislocated by the awful crash which followed. The two men exchanged a few hard words, and then changed ends. When once again the coffin was lifted, I repeated the performance and this time I thought that my head had been cracked wide open, so heavily did the coffin fall. "Bloody casket," said the second wretched man whom I had wounded. "Come, let us dress our several wounds," observed the first, and they both withdrew. Quickly I climbed out of the coffin and secreted myself in a cupboard. The two men returned and as they raised the coffin they noted with pleasure that it had grown much lighter, though they added that after the treatment which they had received it was little enough compensation.

Hardly breathing, I remained in the cupboard and must have fallen asleep, for when I awoke it was very

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late and there was no sound from anywhere. I timidly pushed open the door and, seeing that it was dark outside, I tiptoed along the passage, which was lined with empty coffins, through an underground tunnel, at the end of which was a door. Above the door was a grimy fanlight, which in the full light of day must have permitted merely the most meagre illumination, but which, as the hour was now advanced, served only to indicate in rough outline the gruesome furnishings of this charnel house. Inadvertently I stumbled over a coffin and fell full length across it. The sound echoed terrifyingly along the passages, and I lay still for several minutes as I waited for something—I know not what—to happen. The lid of the coffin had fallen open, and although the interior was empty, my nostrils discerned the odour of death. Undoubtedly each of the coffins which was about me had contained a body which now, forced back into life, was labouring distractedly in the salt mines. I wondered with extreme apprehension what would have happened if the wicked men who were in charge of this place had discovered me on account of the noise which I had inadvertently made, and I shuddered as I thought of the torture which would certainly have been my portion. But as it seemed that they had heard nothing, I rejoiced in the fact that I was free to search where I would, and to note down in my book all that I should see in order that Mr. Hawke might succeed in bringing these villains to justice. Accordingly, I got up from the ground and made my way towards the door.

It was locked and I thrilled as I undid the formidable bolts and locks which covered its length. Then, opening the door, I went out into . . . hell! At that moment I was unable to remember the world which I had left, and so comparisons or degrees were forbidden

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to me, but suffice it to say that never could I have conceived of a more frightful place existing. Mr. Hawke was right; undoubtedly there was a community that was forced to live here, and my determination to expose this dreadful thing became an obsession which increased with every fresh sight that I saw. I am lost for words with which to describe what lay before me. Fortunately it was night, and so I was not subjected at once to the full impact of my surroundings. At first I could only distinguish grey and filthy buildings which were outlined against the sky, and I was aware that a thin drizzle of rain was falling. (Which later I was to discover was a feature of the place.) Imagine my reactions to being in a dead city. Any tiredness that I might have felt was banished, and I roamed the lengths of the sinister street in which I found myself. Then I saw the shape of a corpse walking towards me. For a moment, in the darkness, I had a glimpse of expressionless eyes and of the sallowness of death, and then the joyless creation passed the place where I was standing, and continued on its way. I shook inwardly, for my nerves are not strong, and whilst it was little inconvenience for me to spend a length of time in a coffin, it was quite another thing to enjoy any degree of equanimity in a city of the dead. Nor was the least horrifying factor the size of the place, for it seemed to extend on all sides, and in order not to lose my bearings I took care not to wander too far from the crematorium, for I did not wish to be lost in the deathly community. From time to time I saw other shapes of corpses flitting backwards and forwards, and each was as uncanny as the first which I had seen. What is this metamorphosis that we call death? It is merely the animate becoming inanimate; the closing of the petals of a flower as though for sleep. But what discord in nature there

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would be if rude hands should tear apart such tender coverings, and expose to the harshest light that soft interior of the somnolent bud. Therefore, I felt a far greater fear than could ever have been consequent upon the mere contemplation of what I readily accept to be a natural process.

At last, it seemed that the entire corpse population had returned to its place of habitation, and but for the air of degradation and infamy, of inherent evil and impending disaster which saturated the very paving stones of the streets, my soul would have felt a little lighter. Nevertheless, I cannot deny the morbid fascination which this terrible place held for me, though I thought with distress that had I died I might have been sent to the crematorium, and on that account have ended up here as an inhabitant. Indeed, so great was my horror at every sight that each facet of it impressed itself with terrible clarity upon my brain, and I knew that, despite my amnesia, I could not help but remember it for ever. I had scarcely realised the rapidity with which time was passing, and it was a surprise for me to note that now a mud-coloured light was beginning to make itself visible from behind a thickness of clouds.

It was then that I first became fully aware of the true nature of these infamous structures in which the corpses were quartered. In height they extended to some three or four stories which included basements and attics. The most immediate impression that they made was one of extreme ugliness; an ugliness which could only have been conceived with the overt purpose of oppressing the soul of man. Each dwelling was strictly uniform with its neighbour, and an observer standing in the middle of this particular street could see extending limitlessly upon either side and in each

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direction an exact reduplication of each individual monstrosity. How can one describe the deeper impression that these erections made upon the conscious spirit? For myself, it appeared that some satanic power must have contrived the design of such habitations, and that those corpses who lived within their extremities must have been forced to remain there under the strictures of some awesome penalty. If this had not been so, no creature would have existed of its own choice in precincts so debased. I thought of the horrible mockery of fields and meadows which was implied by the few square feet of discoloured grass that lay before each dwelling, and of the premeditated insult to even the slightest and least developed sensibility, that was implicit in the structure of the hideous façade, archways and balustrades which—whilst intrinsically ugly in themselves—possessed not even the slightest utilitarian value.

From time to time doors of the habitations opened and shut, and grim shapes started to appear once more in the streets. As the light increased in strength I glimpsed more clearly the faces of these creatures, and instantly my heart was touched by the expressions of sadness and of suffering which I saw about me. Another factor, however, served particularly to impress me: that of their alarming grotesqueness. Admittedly one does not expect a corpse which has been forced back into life to look very beautiful, but certainly the appearance of the figures that I saw was quite unprecedented. Indeed, after a time, I became more aware of their hideous aspect than that of their suffering, and my sympathy receded still further when I saw how vicious was their nature. One creature accidentally bumped into another, and the corpse who had been little incommoded turned about and hit the first

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upon the chest. The first corpse acknowledged the blow with humility, but when the other had walked on, he raced up behind him and hit him on the head with a piece of lead piping. A female corpse then grappled with the assailant and the three corpses fell into the road, and a vehicle which was passing went over their heads and crushed them to pulp. Instantly there was great activity, and corpses who previously had looked sullen and miserable suddenly appeared to be full of joy and vitality, and hordes of them came running to peer at their less fortunate fellows. A few seconds had barely passed but that the road was filled from end to end with gibbering, chuckling corpses who fought, pushed and kicked each other in their endeavour to attain the best points of vantage. I was so astounded by this behaviour that I felt impelled to ask a creature, who was standing near me, the reason why one corpse should feel such interest to view another corpse which had been crushed, but I received no reply other than a look of hatred. Now a fresh commotion took place, and this was caused by the fact that there had been an influx of juvenile corpses who all wished to see the exhibits. Adult corpses who had been scrimmaging for position were now, in the interests of education and recreation, willing to cede their places to the young ones. I was so disconcerted that I continued to repeat my queries, but no one would give me satisfaction. However, I noticed one corpse who was standing by a lamp-post, and he looked a little different from the rest. That is, although he was ugly, nay possibly even deformed, his eyes were less cadaverous than those of his fellows, and on this account I made my way towards him.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but is this not a degrading spectacle?”

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"A most degrading spectacle," he replied, and smiled at me. Encouraged, I continued to speak.

"I am dead," I said, in order to lull any suspicions that he might entertain to the contrary.

"Of course," he replied gravely.

"But I am disgusted by the behaviour of my brother corpses." He looked at me nervously. "Do not speak so loudly. You must be careful, for they will do terrible things to us both if they realise that we are criticising them." Already the hostile glances which I was receiving were becoming intensified.

"But why do they behave like this?" I whispered to my friend.

"It is because they are quite insatiable for the sight of blood, though with all that is going on at the present time one might conjecture that they see enough of it. Of course, in times of peace it is quieter, and consequently they utilise then every possible means by which they might gratify their appetites. For example, they are willing to squander their meagre corpse pay in order to see two of their fellows belabour each other until one or the other can bear the pain no longer. Similarly, they like to torture small animals by setting other animals upon them. If, after all this, their palates still require titillation, they order their meat so raw that by pressing knife upon it, the blood will gush forth in streams. When every so often they are able to indulge in widespread and bloody conflicts, however, it is usually to the exclusion of their other interests. Nevertheless such an event as you have just witnessed always proves too great a temptation for them to ignore. But if you are interested in such things, you should soon be able to witness even more pronounced bloodshed in a few minutes, for this is the hour of missiles."

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"The hour of missiles?" I questioned.

"Watch, and you will see what I mean," replied my friend.

There was a great turmoil in the crowd. It seemed that something of considerable moment was pending and the incident that had just occurred was disregarded. All the corpses were looking upwards expectantly. Then, for no apparent reason and from no apparent direction, an explosive missile came hurtling through the air, and landing, destroyed a number of habitations and mutilated some hundreds of the corpses. I and my friend were only unharmed through singular good fortune. "What was that?" I asked. My friend gripped my arm tightly. "Watch," he repeated. Many of the corpses who had been spared by the missile were now running about those that had been injured and were engaged in removing round counters, watches and other articles from their pockets which they secreted immediately in their own. When, however, they were aware that their comrades were doing the same thing, they became furious and set upon them in considerable wrath. Others, like demented ants, had started swarming over the ruined habitations, also stealing everything that they could find. A few however resisted such ignoble impulses and set themselves to aiding the injured. This would have continued some time, had not a number of uniformed corpses suddenly arrived: brusquely these new arrivals cleared the roads, and the corpses, jumping and gesticulating excitedly, started to line the pavements. Then an escort of corpses on motor-cycles ushered in their wake a large, open vehicle, in which was seated a decorated and pretentious corpse who saluted austerely to each side. The standing corpses became frenzied.

"What is the matter with them?" I asked my friend.

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He shook his head and did not attempt an answer.
“Is that the man who runs this place?”

“No,” said he, “you must have been aware that the one in the car was a corpse like all of us. He is only a war leader. Nobody has ever seen the one who runs this place.”

“Nobody,” I repeated with astonishment.

“That is the tragedy of it,” whispered my friend. “The fact is that they are really terrified that no one runs the place at all. Therefore, they all pretend that they know who it is, although they have never seen him, and in between harming each other they spend all the time making intercessions to him for immunity from similar ill-treatment.”

“How astonishing. But if the person who is in charge never appears, who directs them in their work at the salt mines?” My friend looked at me curiously. “I am surprised that you have heard of the salt mines. The fact is that the salt mines are only a small side of the whole devilish affair. There are a thousand other occupations as well. But most astonishing is that no one in charge directs the corpses to pursue any set line of action or of conduct.”

“I can hardly believe that. They would surely not do this work and live in this manner if they were able to do otherwise. Besides, I have been told about their being driven to work in the salt mines by creatures with whips.”

“That is more or less true. But the creatures with whips are merely other corpses who take a delight in being officious towards their fellows.”

My friend stopped speaking just as the end of the procession was disappearing from sight. The drizzle ceased and it began to snow heavily. Those corpses who lay mutilated in the street were soon completely

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covered by snowflakes, and were thus rendered invisible, whilst those who had lived in the habitations, and who had now returned to survey the ruins, found those of their possessions which had proved too unwieldy to steal in a most deteriorated condition. Then a curious thing happened. Those who were left alive suddenly became aware that I and my friend appeared to have suffered no loss and no injury. At first they talked together angrily and pointed at us. I had little idea that their present indications of enmity could have so shallow a foundation, for I would have rather expected that the corpses—like the human beings which they once were—would have rejoiced that at least some amongst their number should have been unhurt by the catastrophe. Therefore, I was astonished to see a large corpse, who himself had apparently suffered no particular injury, pick up a large stone, which he hurled at me with as much strength as he could muster. I was about to parley with him when my friend pulled me swiftly away. Glancing back I saw that various corpses had formed themselves into an angry group which was following after us. My friend intimated by his own example that I should run, and it was only by at last secreting ourselves within a doorway, that we managed to elude our pursuers.

"Have you seen enough?" he asked me grimly. I would have replied in the affirmative, but that remembrance of my mission bade me investigate further. However, before I could reply, my friend, who was now peering through the doorway, said: "As it appears that we have momentarily evaded capture, you may care to accompany me to my tower." He warned me nevertheless to follow him with discretion, for he feared that our pursuers might still be searching for us. However, we reached his tower without hindrance, and I followed

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him up to his room on the top floor. He beckoned me to a window, and I looked with horror at the scene of devastation which lay upon all sides. "What are the corpses doing?" I asked. "At the moment they are seeking to recover their strength. When they have done so they will start calling upon the boss."

"You mean the one that no one has ever seen?" "Yes." "Will anything happen?" "Nothing." "Surely then they will lose faith in him?" "On the contrary, their faith will be doubled." As he spoke I saw that the corpses were growing yet more sickly in appearance. Then a horrible moaning started, and either from weakness or despair they started falling to their knees. From this position they fell forward on to their faces, and then rolled over on the ground. "They are dying from hunger because the snow has ruined the crops, and in consequence they can have no food," said my friend. The snow then started to melt, and one or two survivors came from hiding-places and started to chant thanks to the unseen boss. "At least they are saved," I commented. But at that moment an immense torrent formed by the melted snow cascaded about the buildings, bringing to ruin a number which had escaped the missile. Those who were thanking the unseen boss were swept away in the succeeding deluge. "Now they are all gone," I said to my friend. "No," he replied, "they breed as quickly as mouse corpses."

True enough, the floods had hardly subsided, and the drizzle was barely starting anew, when a tremendous crowd of new corpses came running along the streets. They appeared to be expecting some fresh calamity, but lacking this diversion they sought for distraction amongst themselves. "The man in that shop is not politically conscious. He does not vote," I heard one of them cry, and some of the crowd of corpses

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started throwing bricks through the shop window which had been indicated. The corpses grew perceptibly happier. "Look," shouted another, "there is a man who was born nearer the sun than we were. His skin is darker than ours." "Lynch him," came back the cry, and immediately a corpse whose face was brown was hung upon a lamp post and riddled with bullets. "Another foreigner," screamed a patriotic corpse, and as no one was quite sure who was indicated, each set upon his neighbour. The furore became so intense and the bloodshed so tremendous, as fresh hordes of corpses materialised from every entrance to the street, that I suggested to my friend that soon no one would be left, despite their propensities for breeding. He shook his head. "That is merely false optimism," he replied.

I turned towards the crowd once more. Another missile came hurtling through the air, and on exploding destroyed an enormous number of combatants. Those who were left shook their fists in the apparent direction from which the missile had arrived, and then set themselves back to looting. A new procession passed along the streets, and slowly at first, but with gathering momentum, flakes of snow began to fall upon the corpses who had been incapacitated by the missile. I turned from the balcony and my friend motioned me into a room. "There," said he, "you could have had no better introduction." "But what must we do?" I asked him.

He lowered his voice. "I should not attempt to answer your question; indeed I cannot. In any case I have to be most careful, for I am already marked down by the corpses for my lack of conformity, and when they discover my whereabouts I shall be captured and put away."

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“But what have you done?”

“I have already told you, but I will repeat it, for as far as the corpses are concerned it is the greatest crime, that one can commit. *I have not conformed.* It is like this. The corpse mentality is very limited, and on that account it can only accept existence in the narrowest conception of the word. It seeks always to impose the same stultifying pattern of its own life upon every other creature, for it wishes all other corpses to be the precise equivalent of itself. Therefore, this is the primary purpose of its schools, its armies and its institutions. When a corpse seeks, however, to pursue a life that runs apart from that of the multitude, it exposes itself to every form of abuse and degradation.”

“That is hard to believe. But tell me from whence the missiles came. Surely there are not other countries of corpses?”

“Yes, there are very many. We are at war with several, so I cannot tell you precisely in which country the missiles had their origin. It is only such hostilities which prevent the corpses over here from tearing each other to pieces, for it is a fact that in no other times but those of common danger are they united.”

My friend appeared quite sincere, but his intense bitterness made me doubt the veracity of all that he was telling me. Then it occurred to me that he might have become biased on account of some injustice which he had possibly received at the hands of the corpses. “Tell me,” I said, “are you in any kind of trouble with the authorities?”

“Yes, I am virtually a fugitive. You see, not only do I lack a taste for their internecine combats, but also I object to taking part in their wider conflicts. Legally,

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they can demand the participation of a corpse in their own hostilities, completely irrespective of his sympathies and inclinations. I have refused to participate in their wretched squabbles and therefore I am an outlaw to their state. Amongst the most virulent of those who have condemned me were certain sections of the praying corpses, who maintained that I should be condemned for my attitude in the name of the unseen boss, and indeed I had expected much misfortune from their account, but that luckily a great famine afflicted the land, and they were all required to pray for its cessation.”

“Did it end?”

“Yes. That is to say, the numbers of the hungry decreased, for there was a plague which wiped out four-fifths of the population.”

“What did the remaining fifth do?”

“They thanked the unseen boss for having spared them and driven on by the frenzy of the praying corpses they started to propagate themselves anew in ever increasing numbers. Before long the population had trebled its original size.”

“What happened then?”

“There was great distress. The superfluous two-thirds of the population had no work by which they might maintain themselves, nor had they anywhere to live.”

“But why did not those who were able to work make houses for them to live in?”

“Because those without houses had nothing with which to pay for such services.”

“I see. But what happened to them eventually?”

“They started to prey upon the rest of the population. Instead, however, of trying to obtain food and shelter with the money which they received for the goods that

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they had stolen, they inhabited drinking dens and halls of sexual stimulation.”

“Halls of sexual stimulation?”

“Yes,” said my friend. “Forgive these digressions, but really you are the cause of them. You see, the corpses have one overriding instinct, and most things in this world arise from it; it is sexuality. Curiously enough they will rarely admit this, and though every form of entertainment and social intercourse is directly connected with it, no one is ever permitted to acknowledge the fact. Now the halls of sexual stimulation exist for one purpose, and as such are unique in all our institutions. This purpose is to bring corpses of different sexes together, and in time with a sequence of curious sounds which are produced by hired corpses from various instruments, the first group of corpses prances up and down before the other and makes a number of sexual preliminaries. The corpses even grasp each other about the waist, and every season introduces a fresh series of mobile postures. Social licence is never withheld for the performance of these movements, and each year the intricacies become more and more licentious. Now the strange thing is that there is an acknowledged culmination to such activity, though when isolated it is frowned upon and completely dissociated from these preliminaries. That is to say, that after a given period of stimulation, a curious sequence of purely physical interactions should take place, which are in their turn productive of mutually related spasms.”

“What a joyless procedure,” I remarked.

“Profoundly so. Nevertheless, it is the very core of their existence. But let me return to explaining why I was a fugitive. Of all my beliefs, the one to which the corpses take most exception is that which inclines to

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the view that the unseen boss is not influenced by their prayers and that his existence is entirely hypothetical. If he does exist, however, I believe that he does not intend us to be aware of this fact, for so far as I can see he has given no finally valid indication of it. I assume that his purpose might not be unrelated to a desire to view the behaviour of his creation, when that behaviour is not allied to too obvious motive. Similarly, I can only imagine that he would be greatly angered by the hypocritical attentions of bad men, and that in the same way the good actions of righteous men would be sufficiently pleasing to him without further demonstrations of fealty to a power that intellectually cannot be shown to exist."

"Are you not in danger of becoming as dogmatic in the propagation of your opinions as you claim your opponents to be?"

"I endeavour not to become so. I admit the possible fallibility of my beliefs for they arise from the intellect, and I do not accord any finality or ultimate validity to the reasoning faculties as such. I acknowledge freely that the chasm between belief and unbelief is so wide that those who stand upon either side can rarely understand or respect the other. Therefore I merely assert that the intuitive belief which has apparently been accorded to very many denizens of this place has not been accorded to me. This, however, does not prevent my acknowledging the rectitude and honourable conduct of certain of my fellows who profess belief and regulate their lives according to the tenets of their faith. But it is because the majority of those who claim this belief are completely uninfluenced by it in their actions and behaviour that our civilisation has reached its present impasse."

"What, therefore, is the answer?"

DEREK LINDSAY

"I believe, in the first place, that everything must be reduced, as far as is possible, to fundamentals. We corpses are in this world without our own consent or desire, and as far as we can tell our existence is adventitious and without ultimate purpose. This fact should not drive us to the extremes of erecting philosophies or religions that treat on the one hand of complete despair or on the other of facile optimism. Such things can only lead to disaster, destruction and persecution. Let us instead accept our situation with all the dignity that we can contrive, and endeavour to live our lives in such a way that each action should at the best be of active benefit to another person, and at the worst be deleterious to no one but ourselves."

I was moved by my friend's speech, and felt ashamed that I had cast suspicions as to the veracity of what he had been telling me. In my confusion I turned once more towards the window of the tower, and saw to my horror that the streets below were thronged with corpses. In front of the door of the tower was a large blue vehicle, from which had descended some uniformed figures who were entering the building. I informed my friend of what was happening, and he told me calmly that we must have been seen entering the tower and that in a minute he would be arrested. I urged him to escape, but he told me that there was no other way out, and that he was indubitably trapped. This realisation helped him to summon fresh reserves of strength and his face expressed no emotion as he heard the sound of boots upon the stairs of the tower.

"There is little time left to us," he said. "Therefore to conclude. You may have observed that above all things I cherish freedom, though so far I have not mentioned that word. It is because my concept of freedom is not that of the popular politician, nor yet again the debased

THE UNKNOWN LAND

'freedom of the mob, which intrinsically is only the desire for complete liberty in the prosecution of all its inherent beastliness. Instead, I seek the freedom of each individual in his belief and conduct. I—'

He hesitated as he heard the sound of heavy knocking upon the door. "They cannot take you. You have done nothing," I said with great anxiety. "I have professed these views, both in public and in private. Also, I must admit that unworthy desperation with my lot has driven me to certain excesses of expression. Even a few days ago, with the purpose of demonstrating the utter stupidity of a pompous fool of a detective who appeared to me to be the archetype of all credulity and superstition, I went to the length of—" He broke off a second time as the door of the room was burst open. A dozen uniformed corpses entered.

"We have you at last, Mr. Mender of Worlds," said their leader, and his followers seized my poor friend on both sides. Then the leader felt in his victim's inner pocket, and producing a wallet inspected the identity card that was contained therein. "Sebastian Wainwright," said he, "I now apprehend you. You will be placed in a strait-jacket forthwith." Then some of the other corpses turned in my direction. "Run for it," my friend shouted, and suddenly I raced down the stairs, with, I believe, a number of the corpses following me. However, I dared not look back, but raced across the street, up a road, in the direction of the crematorium. By good luck I managed to find the door through which I had first entered into this terrible world, and throwing it open I dashed up the passage inside. In so doing I overturned two attendants, who were carrying a coffin down the passage, but my distress was such that apart from shouting "I'm sorry," I made no effort to help them up with their burden.

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Then, rushing through another door, I found myself opposite the track which led to the two little doors which in their turn gave access to the chapel of the crematorium. Without thinking what I was doing I climbed along the track, butted open the little doors with my head, and pushing forward knocked over another coffin which was in the act of being propelled through the opening. I just noted a body falling out with a crash, as I ran across the chapel, and then out through an exit which at last took me to the right side of the precincts of the crematorium. I had forgotten Mr. Hawke's address, but I had the good fortune to see that it was written on the front page of the notebook which was still strapped to my hand. Summoning a taxi I gave the address and within a few minutes I was standing before the well-known detective's office. Then, knocking on the door, I walked into his presence.

"For God's sake, Mr. Hawke," I said, "I have seen everything, and it is a thousand times worse than you could ever imagine. Something must be done to stop all this."

"You remember my name," said the great detective with interest.

"Yes, yes, yes. All that I have seen and all that is connected with it is impressed upon my brain with a clarity that could not be exceeded. But, listen. You must do something and quickly. They have got my friend."

"Sit down," said Mr. Hawke, "and tell me your story." There was nothing for it but to comply with his request. Nevertheless, I made my recitation as brief as possible. However, for some reason or other, he was not impressed.

"I think that you are an impostor," he said suddenly.

"What!" I shouted.

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"Yes, an impostor," he repeated. "You see, it later transpired that there was nothing in this crematorium story at all. My client turned out to be a lunatic. Funnily enough, now I come to think of it, his story about corpses being brought to life was a bit far-fetched."

"You're wrong," I screamed, nearly beside myself. "It is true, every bit of it. Your client was not mad."

"Not mad." Mr. Hawke laughed. "He was so mad that he's just about to be captured and shut up. The fool apparently goes around speaking to people and telling them that they are corpses——"

The telephone rang, and Mr. Hawke answered it. When he had finished, he turned to me. "They've caught him. He was hiding in a tower. There was another lunatic with him, but he's escaped. But still they've got him, they've got Sebastian Wainwright."

I collapsed upon the floor in a faint. . . . When I regained consciousness I asked Mr. Hawke where I had been the last day and a half, if it were not in an unknown land beyond the crematorium. "As there is nothing abnormal in any of your description of what you say you have seen, for what you have described depicts merely a picture of everyday life as lived by good, ordinary citizens," said he, "I merely assume that you went into the crematorium one way and out through the back into the same streets that we live in all our lives."

My collapse had restored my memory in entirety. I could now recall all the years before I had read Mr. Hawke's advertisement in the paper, and I realised the truth of what he was saying. What I had witnessed was only the normal behaviour of my fellow men. My experience of the past thirty-six hours was no different from the main experience of my life.

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“Mr. Hawke,” I said, “I have done you a favour in carrying out your instructions. Will you please do me a similar favour?” The detective shifted uneasily in his chair. “If it’s not too hard, I might.”

“Tell me first; I assume that coffins at the crematorium are conveyed straight to the furnace after all.”

“That is so.”

“Then in the same way that you secreted me there in a coffin before, I ask you to do so again, but with this difference, let the lid be screwed down.”

“I am willing to do so,” said he. “Have you any money?” I wrote him a cheque for a suitable sum.

“Thank you,” said Mr. Hawke. “I will look after you. Be here tomorrow morning at seven o’clock, and we will collect you in a brand-new coffin.”

“Seven o’clock,” I echoed, “but what shall I do in the meantime. I dare not go into the streets again. I never wish to see another person upon this earth.”

The detective took down his mackintosh from behind the door. “I’m calling it a day,” he said, “but you can stay here all night if you care to do so.”

“Yes, but what can I do to pass the time? You don’t realise my state of mind. I’m nearly demented with misery and despair.”

Mr. Hawke waved his hand in the direction of his desk and a pile of paper that was upon it. “Sit there,” he said, “and write down the particulars of all that you have experienced. That will pass the time until we’re back with the coffin in the morning.”

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I have done so. It is nearly seven. They are coming.

Donald Wilson

SKETCH FOR A DESIGN

IT was in October that it happened. We had left Scapa over a week before and hung around as if in a rain-drenched cinema queue, waiting for the convoy to form up. I was a Corporal then and working in the Marine's Office, so that I had it pretty soft. It wasn't pleasant for the ordinary watchkeepers, though, in an 8-inch cruiser sculling around the North Sea, and we were pleased when we could take up station and go ahead. We were the flagship of the close escort force, Admiral Reginer commanding. Funny little man—looked like the skipper of a coal barge, except that he was clean! We didn't know much about him, but nicknamed him "Queenie," and hoped he'd let us run our ship.

On the morning of the first day of the voyage proper, I went up on to the bridge to supervise the cleaning of the twin Brens. They were an unofficial addition to the ship's H.A. armament and the Captain of Marines personal offensive arm. It was very cold and the barrels struck chill through my mitts as I examined them. As far as the eye could see were ships:

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steady plodding angular tankers, merchantmen with vehicles visible on their decks; destroyers controlled and dejected like whippets being walked round slum streets ; and, over there where the lamp was flashing with disconcerting brilliance, the other "eight-inch". Somewhere, too, in the murk were the two six-inch cruisers, whilst over our quarter—sensed at our backs —the heavy covering force was creeping over another horizon. Rumour had it that it contained two battle-wagons, a Yankee flat-top and some heavy cruisers. Apparently we were considered a sufficiently succulent bait to draw the surface raider. It was a warm thought, all that armour and fire power in wireless contact. We were like a child towing a heavy toy by a spider thread.

The probable routine of events w~~as~~ known to most of the ship's company. The covering force would stay with us until we were about a day's steaming past Iceland and then would turn back, having made a wide aerial reconnaissance. We should have to ward off aircraft ourselves—and they'd probably paste us from then on, aircraft and U-boats. Unpleasant, but predictably so, and you didn't last long in the water in that sort of weather.

On the third day we sighted an enemy plane. Four-engined Blohm-and-Voss, I think it was. It circled round for almost the whole of a bright Arctic morning, keeping carefully out of range, a little heavily, like a rather weary vulture.

There were about a hundred and twenty planes when they came in. Three waves one after another in the short winter afternoon.

They sank two of the merchantmen and we left another hull down but still blazing, its dirty crimson banners merging into the spectrum haze of the oncoming night. A destroyer was limping now and

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not all the merchant 'vessels could make even the painfully slow rate of knots at which we had been steaming.

We didn't like it somehow—this long-range attack by air. They were restless down on the mess-decks—the rhythm of events had been interfered with. We should have been attacked nearer to the German bases in Norway. Something was wrong. . . .

Not a few of the ratings were convinced that we were being slowed so that the surface raiders could nip in and pick us off more easily. Our thoughts began to centre on the shadowy covering force. We dwelt lovingly on its rumoured strength, and drew comfort from its invisible nearness.

All the next day the heavy vulture circled overhead, and I began to envisage our convoy as the plane's pilot must see us—an unwieldy agglomeration wallowing in a saucer of sea. There was more wind that day and the great-bellied tankers laboured in the long deep seas. It was colder, too, and ice formations were beginning fantastically to bedeck us like a lithograph of a Polar expedition. .

The following morning, as I entered our stuffy cupboard of an office, I was greeted by the orderly with:

"The covering force has turned back!"

I knew better on shipboard than to ask "How do you know?" What faint hopes I had were dispelled by a shrugged confirmation from the Captain of Marines. Anything might happen now. Air reconnaissance had reported the sea free of surface craft—you see!

All the next day the four-engined aircraft shadowed us. I had read of thirst-mad wanderers hating the patient vultures which tirelessly awaited their end. I feared the dark, impersonal machine, but my fear left

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me too weak in the guts to hate it. Unwearied omen of ill, it followed on until the early dark encompassed us. The weather, though cold, was still bright and clear when I went up top the following morning. I was taking a practice squint through the target sight of the Brens when a rating stopped by me and said in a monotone, without turning his head :

“Pocket battleship and heavy cruiser, day’s steamin’ away,” and walked on.

For the first time on that trip I felt a marked reaction to bad news. The vegetable unease whose growth had been unaffected by the bombing suddenly burst into scarlet flower. My reactions were so like a book description that for a moment I wondered if I were imagining them. This was it, then—we were going to be blown out of the water by 14-inch guns.

Everyone seemed to know when I went below. It was as if a long-held note had been resolved by a definitive chord. The men avoided each other’s eyes as they worked and the Marine on keyboard sentry, a man usually disgustingly lighthearted and incredibly smart, seemed to have wilted almost within the hour, his very boots and buttons dulled by the news.

For the rest of the day one thought was uppermost in the minds of all ranks. Could the covering force be recalled in time? A fever of hope raged behind men’s eyes. Small groups assembled about the flats and were not dispersed. There was little rumour-mongering during this period of waiting. When “Clear lower decks” was piped, very few of us knew what our “skipper” of an Admiral was going to say. Almost the whole ship’s company, a mass broken here and there by superstructure stood expectantly, waiting with uplifted faces.

The little man was obviously worked up about

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something. His face was very red and he kept removing and replacing his cap nervously. The Captain and Executive Officer stood impassively behind him, their faces expressionless beneath the hoods of their duffle coats. In spite of the knifing wind, everyone was standing very still and for a moment even the engines' throb seemed to cease. Old "Queenie" broke the unreal silence with a stifled reading of the signal which he had been crumpling in his hand. I heard snatches only, but the sense was there—"extensive reconnaissance . . . withdrawn on information . . . unable to come up in time . . ." So this is what it feels like to be the incipient hero of a gallant action. Just a moment—he's going on, his voice is clearer now.

"I have therefore been ordered to withdraw this escort and return to base with all speed."

He stood there gripping the rail, his belly out-thrust against his British Warm and tears ran slowly down his cheeks. A wave ran along the ranks of the Marines. The sailors shuffled and moved their heads. A cry that was almost a moan rose up from the whole ship's company.

"Keep silence. . . . Stand still!"

Several people relieved their feelings in sharply uttered commands.

The little Admiral stood very still and did not move even when the Captain asked for permission to carry on. He was still standing with his belly against the rail, staring aft when I went below.

Ten minutes later we turned sharply to port and, as I rushed out on deck, I saw the destroyers wheel together and steam across the convoy as if all the U-boats in the German Navy were assailing its left flank. But their speed was of flight, not of offence, and as the wheel swung over again I had a last glimpse of those

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blundering ships defenceless as slugs in echelon upon an asphalt path. I did not look again.

It was a sick ship which sailed back to Scapa. None uttered the unspoken thought—indeed, had anyone expressed it he would have been silenced by a chorus of :

“Do you think we wanted to commit suicide?”—a vomiting of that same “sweet reasonableness” which was so unpleasant to the palate and unsettling within.

I don’t know if you know the canteen at Scapa. A long, bare building. A big stoker was the first of the ship’s company to go ashore and enter it. Most of us were bound there, though—there isn’t anywhere else to go really. As I entered I saw our stoker had his back against the bar and was drinking a pint musingly. There was a mixed crowd of sailors and marines from the vessels of the covering force, sitting around. Talk slackened and heads were turned as more of our ship’s company began to enter.

“He that fights and runs away, eh, Jack?”

The big stoker didn’t seem to alter the rhythm of his slow, meditative sips, but the crash as he swept the glasses from the table at which the speaker was sitting disturbed the after-stirrings of his words in air.

It took the duty watch from two ships and all the patrols for miles around to stop that fight.

Hugo Charteris

LIBERATION IN BALI

THE faded medals on Colonel Ter Birgen's coat were known to very few. Their colour bands were the spectra, as it were, of pre-war soldiering —now faded, forgotten and quite superseded on every hand, in number and vividness. And in their fewness, they represented his absence during the years that his profession came to life. The sun of Bali shining through sentinel palms, and casting straight the shadow of a flagpole and colourlessly the shadow of the Dutch flag on the headquarters wall, lit upon them and did what it could for their colour.

The Colonel sat erect at his desk. The humiliating rule of bowing for three and a half years to his Japanese guards had not altered any of those habits of mind or body in which thirty years ago he had been trained as a soldier. Now, those habits were all he had to hang on to in a world that was full of an unsteadiness that he could not understand.

One might have compared his character to a poor picture with a good frame: inside his manners and habits, ruled long ago, nothing much had grown up.

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He was peremptory in the tones rather than the substance of speech, precise in the detail rather than the relevancy of movement. When he gave orders or made statements his whole striking manner was belied by his eyes, which were always stamped with an interrogative stare. But as with some limited parsons, his devotion to the moral frame of his profession won him not confidence but the respect which will always be due to uncommon decency..

Once he had prepared Bali for defence, but when the crisis came, orders had refused him the right to defend it. He had signed away his charge to a stunted creature in brown with enormous spectacles, hissing teeth and a sword that seemed much too big for him. Later he had been slapped and made to grovel in front of some of the Balinese militia that he had trained.

Then for three and a half years his life was reduced to the mere task of remaining alive—in a doze of progressive weakness, monotony and squalor. An inimical picture was forever stamped in his memory—of palms and wire and smooth trodden earth, and huts in an enclosure like a marshalling yard, full of dissected trains ; of heat and men in rags.

Over food and space he had always maintained his dignity, his rights and not more than his rights.

Now he had been sent back to Bali. . . .

Now he had been sent back to Bali—as military commander, peace-maker, the man who was “there before,” who can handle the present situation, who knows the people.

Concluding a long report, he wrote, “It is my opinion that the incidents described above are of so slight and local a nature that they can be completely stopped by a show of force. The people are by nature peace-loving and they do not want trouble now.”

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His chin was tucked into his neck, such was the straightness of his back. His nib rasped a decisive line under his signature. He blotted the report.

The door opened and a man came in who would have favoured the eradication of the words "a show of". He would have written "by force". He was very small with a long pale face and small red-rimmed eyes. He was always barking out Dutch so that it sounded like a sort of asthmatic Prussian. His name was Leining. During the war he had fought with distinction in the Australian Air Force. Afterwards the troubles that attended the return of the Dutch to the East Indies created new scope for his talents and surrounded him again with the atmosphere of violence in which his disposition thrived, the state of flux in which anyone who knew his own mind stood out from the rest with ease. The Colonel saw him as something that the world had produced in the years that he had been a prisoner, something that he did not understand, with a manner that waived the rules.

Leining heard the decisive rasp of the Colonel's pen. The impatience he felt for his Commander was never expressed in his features, for these were fixed permanently, to the exclusion of every other sentiment, in a look of irritable self-assertion.

"The Rajah of Kampas has sent this message. It says he dare not leave his palace to come to the conference. Apparently there are terrorists in the neighbourhood."

The scorn with which Leining pronounced the word "terrorists" was in itself a recommendation of a policy. It was also a taunt. The sun shining over his shoulder made it impossible for the Colonel to give him the direct stare which he gave automatically to all who came before him. He groped in the blaze of light for the message form and then, taking it, straightened the

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creases by smoothing it on the blotter several times. It seemed as though he wished by this fussy smoothing to put off, even for a few seconds, the moment when he would have to read it.

So now the Rajahs were afraid—of what? Armed youths, Pamoedas they said. Extremists, terrorists. The same old story.

Traditional spirits and ghosts would have been more tangible, more easily dealt with. Even for Occidental eyes they would at times have produced phenomena. But these! They had never been seen even as ghosts have been seen. They had never been named or located. Sometimes the Colonel felt that they existed less than ghosts, at other times and now he felt them to be as real and numerous as the shadows cast by the sun in that island of temples, hills and woods and few clouds.

"The Rajah could be fetched," said Leining.

"Disturbances must be avoided at all costs. Every effort must be made to win the people by peaceful means." Unconsciously in reply the Colonel had quoted from an old directive from G.H.Q.

Major Leining's telephone rang in the next room. He turned away. As he passed through the door an English officer intruded his head. "Are you ready to see the War Correspondents, sir?"

The Colonel looked vaguely over the top of the message.

"Oh, yes—yes." As they filed into the room he stood up—there were women amongst them. He smiled at them with his mouth and said "Good morning" every now and again. In all there were twenty-five. Most had expensive cameras round their necks, all were brown as holidaymakers. There was an American woman with sunglasses that made her look like some creature of a future age, a young Indian with notebook open and

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pencil ready, and a man with a mean face and a jaw that seemed to be rotating over gum merely to mitigate the boredom which was stagnant in his eyes; and another wearing articles of American Army clothing, his shirt open, revealing hair lank with sweat; he was stout and dour; showy guns should have been at his hips. Inside the room they seemed to make themselves aggressively at home. There were only five chairs. The women didn't get one between them.

Elaborate courtesy was expressed in the Colonel's manner, dignity and strength in his bearing, in the carriage of his head. But the interrogative stare in his eyes was more pronounced than ever. He signed to the English Public Relations Officer. What was required of him, he asked.

News—his policy.

His policy—he tried to assemble his thoughts. Tags of directives and phrases from non-committing superiors floated into his mind, making in all jetsam policy. He heard the voice of Headquarters: "Every effort must be made to win the people by peaceful means"—and then saw a picture of Leining, black, in an intolerable frame of light, saying in a deadly simple voice, "By force—by force."

Whatever he said they would send round the world, and in devious ways it would come back, affecting what happened. The whole power of interpretation and distortion lay with them. His eyes rested on the woman in sun goggles, leaning one hand on a chair which was occupied by the man who was chewing. They, like Leining, were something that seemed to have come into being during his absence from soldiering.

His eyes rested again on the woman in goggles. She was leaning against the wall. It was a comfort to him to know suddenly one thing to do.

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When he carried his desk-chair to her he disturbed the atmosphere of the room more than he would have done by prodding the air in front of her with some obscene gesture. Everybody became embarrassed. The third chair was sheepishly relinquished to the second woman by its male possessor, who said he was so sorry, he hadn't seen her there. "Nuts," she said. "Keep it," and remained standing.

"Well, Ladies and Gentlemen" (in English the Colonel spoke with even greater stiffness and formality than in Dutch), "I have not much news for you, I am afraid. Our soldiers have had a friendly reception in most places. Here and there people run away from us—because they are frightened. They think they will be killed if they are seen talking to us—by the Pamoedas. But nobody amongst them seems to have seen a Pamoeda—and we haven't either."

"These Balinesc are simple, peace-loving people and they do not want trouble now. They never used to be like this. They have always believed in things that didn't exist—now they believe in the existence of Pamoedas and Self-government and Liberty. Things that don't exist."

This arrangement of words came out purely by chance so that the Colonel listened to it afterwards and then thought suddenly it might have made some impressive and subtle sense. He looked round. Several of the correspondents were writing. Perhaps he had given a dangerous impression. His interrogative stare wandered round the room—like something looking for home.

"They have always governed themselves here—we never interfered with the Rajahs, with the Balinese culture. Taxes were very small. Few Europeans lived on the island. Two liners brought tourists twice a year

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—but each only stayed four days. Considering its fame the place then was surprisingly unspoilt. Now I think it will soon get back to the happy condition. The people are simple—they don't want trouble!"

The Colonel looked inquiringly at the Public Relations Officer. There was really nothing else to say.

Some of the correspondents were looking around like inattentive school children. One said, with his head on one side in the manner and tone of a Hollywood lawyer examining a witness: "Now could you tell me, Colonel, have any of the Rajahs declined to come to tomorrow's conference."

"Yes," he said. "For what it is worth I had meant to mention it—one is afraid to come." The correspondents looked at him now, all of them attentive. He was concealing things.

Their faces were tilted up like wolves that have heard a distant prey.

"Are you going to fetch him," asked one.

"We shall make it easy for him to come—we have not yet decided on the means."

The Colonel looked round: he wanted them to go. Like Leining, they seemed to be looking to him for something definite. He straightened his back and cleared his throat. "I am a soldier, gentlemen," he said stiffly. "I am afraid I do not understand the needs of newspapers. Is there anything . . . You see, to us this slight trouble in the island is a very little business, it has all happened before. And nobody outside was interested then, but now, suddenly . . . the whole world . . . and reporters . . ." Seeking for words he smiled tightly, a smile to encourage smiles, which, failing, died. He waved his hand in an inconclusive gesture. He was trapped into silence, suffocated by the

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vacuum of his mind. Then, desperately, "Perhaps these might interest you. . . ."

A photograph album lay on the little table, a book full of snapshots symmetrically arranged, each recording an occasion of pre-war official friendliness between the Dutch and the Balinese.

The Colonel moved over to it and opened it. He started explaining the pictures, insinuating all the time the happiness of the natives in those days. He pointed to himself standing amongst smiling Balinese girls—like a white post he seemed amongst those superb bodies with their heavy breasts like delicious fruit broken off from thick stalks, with their thighs and legs sheathed in song which, even in monochrome, an exact camera had rendered wonderfully. He turned the leaves with their cellophane partitions and showed groups of Rajahs, gala gatherings, dances, temples and ceremonies. White men in white appeared centrally in most of the pictures. Sometimes a particular Balinese looked out alone from a portrait—a Rajah or a dancing girl. Sometimes the War Correspondents were interested, sometimes they waited till he turned over. At no time did many of them listen to his commentary,

"I'm afraid that's all, gentlemen."

Time had been passed. Some took leave of the Colonel with a word of thanks, some strolled out as they had strolled in, moving from B to A as they had moved from A to B. For these in recent years variety and interest had suffered inflation—only sensation, the overdose, could rouse them and that only mentally and commercially; and yet their trade was observation.

One, meticulously dressed with precise pince-nez and soap-conditioned face and hands, stayed behind and said in an academically Oxford accent: "I think, Colonel, if you will allow me to say so, your soldiers do

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themselves great harm with the Press, by going through the Kampongs with machine guns—er—at the ready, and with every appearance of expecting hostility. Even the expressions on their faces seem to me, as one might say, defensive and bitter. You know, several of the reporters, especially the Left Wing British and the Indian, are not above making capital out of this attitude. I, myself, should be happy to record in a dispatch a little straightforward wooing of the recalcitrant, and some appreciation of those who have welcomed you back—enthusiastically, as we have seen. I hope you don't mind my saying this."

The Colonel inclined his head. "On the contrary, Mr. Ritter, I am very grateful. As a matter of fact, I gave orders that tact should be shown to the natives. I shall see now that the order is better carried out. I don't have much time to get about myself to see things for myself —there is too much to do here, so much to decide." His homeless eyes wandered across the face of the dapper War Correspondent, but found there nothing but correctness, impartiality and reserved judgment: no hospitality for his doubting stare. He would have liked to discuss—formally and objectively, of course—the whole situation with this well-spoken man of the world.

But all he said was, "Well, Mr. Ritter, I am sorry you cannot see this country as it was. But if you stay—or come back, say, in a month—or two months—when things have got back to normal, then I'll show you the real Bali."

Ritter thanked him and then, looking at his watch, excused himself and went out leaving the Colonel standing in the middle of the room with the last page of the photograph album open beside him. He looked morosely at the plate in its grey setting: the tranced eyes of a dancer looking up fearfully with paper wings

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on her arms as though in dread of a bird of prey.

A bugle blew. The Dutch flag, touched by a breeze, moved inconsequently, like a live thing in sleep. In the distance there was a clattering of mess tins and in neighbouring rooms the sound of chairs being pulled back from tables.

The Colonel checked these goings on by his watch, then, picking up his walking-stick, he walked out. Passing the open door of Leining's room he saw a familiar sight: a pale oval face hanging over a hand that moved without hesitation across a sheet of rough paper. Seen at an angle the surface of the red-rimmed eyes were so small as to be almost invisible. The little crouched figure was oblivious of people going to lunch. Besides him a clerk waited and watched with resignation.

Ter Birgen knew that in the British Divisional H.Q. at Socrabaia, under which his force was included, staff officers were in the habit of saying: "Of course, it's only Leining that holds that bunch together. He may be a shit—but he's got a clue."

In the open the Colonel's deportment became more military than ever. It was as though he had had some wound in the back and been given a false neck. He acknowledged salutes—and looked for them.

In the hotel which served for his headquarters, an Austrian artist and his wife had been put up for various reasons. As painters of scenery they had been tolerated by the Japanese, as non-political and aged people, they had been accommodated by the Dutch, and as one-time Viennese aristocrats they were the object of the Colonel's most studied courtesy. He always bowed to the husband, who, if he was seated, would always have to be nudged by his wife out of a brown study, so as to make suitable acknowledgements. The wife was

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sparkling young at sixty with a trick of a capricious smile which made young subalterns wonder what she had been like forty years ago.

For years her husband had attacked her enthusiasms with the full force of his despairs. His earthly salvation depended on these attacks failing in the future as they had failed in the past, and this unconsciously he knew, for at the end of each defeat, as she crowed a gay and illogical word, he would smile at her with patronising submission that concealed a most serious gratitude. Sometimes, when she indulged her art for saying or doing something completely unexpected, he would look at her as though he were in the early stages of bewitchment. It would be nearly true to say that she kept him painting and alive, for in all but her and his work he had despaired most seriously and unhysterically.

Their now meaningless titles and the material splendour in which they had grown up, they chose to forget out of a sense of realism. However, something about them proclaimed these very things which they saw fit to conceal and no one was happier to be informed of them than the Colonel.

The three happiest moments of his day were at breakfast, lunch and dinner, when he exchanged words with them of studied courtesy, enquired after their welfare, or, if circumstances permitted nothing else, bowed to them across the dining-room and received in acknowledgement from the husband the same greeting, and from the wife an inclination of the head and a smile that in themselves were a whole conversation of most graceful platitudes. (Platitudes were not in her nature, but with the Colonel, for whom she was sorry, she felt they were most suitable and kind.)

Today he went over to their table and for several

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minutes soothed himself by prolonging the routine courtesy. He knew the old artist abhorred nationalism and politics with a savage gloom that made him change his position several times in his chair whenever the subject turned in that direction. This speechless pantomime of contempt was always very acceptable to the Colonel—it drew a line, as it were, through all that worried him. He said slowly, looking over their heads, “Bali isn’t the place it was. I never thought I should see the Balinese so disturbed by politics.”

His reassurance came at first as expected. The old artist knocked the cigarette out of the bowl of his thin-stemmed pipe, then shook his head and arranged the pepper and salt, dusted his knee, pursed his lips at the ceiling, then looked at the bright face of his wife morosely (a thing which he frequently did, as though he were saying with affectionate sarcasm: “Perhaps this will make you happy like everything else does”).

The Colonel was satisfied. With a final formal smile, he made a move to leave, but stopped in surprise as the old artist started speaking. “They are like children here, they are easily frightened by strangeness and equally easily made happy if left to their own lovely devices—they are still innocent. They should be kept so. Something should be done.” Then a smile lightened the heavy corners of his mouth, a smile of resigned contempt for what he had just said. He was surprised that such an ingenuous opinion could have passed his lips—especially as he had come to regard any opinion as ingenuous. “Something should be done,” he repeated in a lighter tone, and refined mockery made him raise his head tremulously and look over his nose-tip at his wife. It was a long time since she had seen him so amused.

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But the Colonel heard only the first serious utterance of the words "Something should be done." As from a cracked gramophone record—again and again, with maddening and monotonous insistence. "Something should be done." He performed the courtesies of leave-taking without zest, and the artist's wife, with her pretty smile, provoked no response from his eyes, now fixed more than ever in a lonely interrogative stare.

At his table he was served by an old servant of the hotel, whom he had known before the war—a man whom it had been his custom to recommend to his friends as "a crack above the average native," "less of a dreamer than the others." "Ahmed," he called, "bawa makan." A figure clad in white appeared silent and erect at his elbow and slid a plate of soup on to the table before him. A stain on the spotless white suit beside him caught the Colonel's eye. He looked up and stared from a few inches into a little island of colour—a badge of red and white, in the shape of a miniature flag, the flag of the Indonesian Republic.

Ahmed seemed to pause before turning away to the kitchen. He was not ashamed of his badge.

The din of forks and knives and the inconsequent voices of people more absorbed in eating than what they were talking about, gave place for a moment to a separate outburst.

"It's just an insult—that's all it is. I can quite believe they're being threatened and terrorised into wearing them. I believe also that they are not interested in wearing them as they are prepared to swear, but what I will not tolerate is the insulting implication that we cannot protect them from a few adolescent hooligans taking orders from a Quisling in Java, the implication that we are weak!"

The Colonel bent his head, even bent his back over

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his soup and was grateful when the strident voice became submerged in loud discussion. After the meal, he thought, he would really get down to some system by which such a state of confidence could be established in the island that the people would no longer be afraid to inform. Only through the services of informers could terrorists be brought to book. A state of confidence parented by a show of force, and by tact. Something must be done. None of them could *want* trouble; surely not even the people who were making trouble could withstand an appeal to their common sense. Besides, they were all such simple people. He remembered how in the old days they had crowned him with flowers wherever he had gone on official business. He and others like him had been little more than guests in this island. They had insured a little beneficial law, a market for the surplus food produce ; they had spoilt nothing, intruded nothing, neither cinemas, religion, whisky nor education—just a few tourists, twice a year, who went after four days.

Leining's voice snapped his reverie out of existence —images of flower homage and the privilege of being impartial and humane died on that instant, on the first emphatic syllable of Leining's utterance.

"Manager! Did I or did I not give orders that the boys were to take those badges off. Right. Well, I'm going to say it again for the last time. And, please understand, Manager, for all our sakes, if the Pamoedas wish to compete with me in the inspiration and putting into practice of terror—they will lose.

"One other thing—if your high education wants nice reasons I would remind you that President Truman, of the United States, and Mr. Attlee, of Great Britain, have affirmed that for the time being they recognise no other Government in these parts than

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that of the Dutch. I am sure they would wish you to know it. No other Government. No other flag. That is all."

The noise of Leining's footsteps crossing the room seemed weirdly loud in the hush that had fallen. Was it the hush, the Colonel wondered, of approval, of outraged opinion, or merely of people looking up at *him*, waiting for *him* to approve or disapprove. Which? His head was bent low over his food. There were Press correspondents in the room, officers from the British Divisional H.Q., there were political observers—there were officers under his command, like Leining—under his command.

In the room talk revived weakly like the flame in a splashed fire. Then it gathered strength and seemed suddenly freer, more vigorous than before, as though a simplification and release had taken place in the minds of all. And then suddenly there was Leining's voice beside him, saying quietly and contemptuously, "I have spoken to the Manager as you instructed, sir."

The words had been quiet but loud enough. The Colonel, looking up, met the paired stare of eyes from two long rows of heads turned inwards towards him. His back stiffened and he raised a napkin to his lips, slowly, in a manner as though he were performing some symbolic rite.

But no formula for outward appearance, whatever it might have been designed to denote, could have covered up the defeat that was written in his eyes, imploring an end, an escape at any cost. His authority, like an ornament knocked from a shelf, was to be reinstated, if he wished—hardly damaged. Or he could make a scene, assert himself, tell Leining where he got off. "Thank you, Major Leining," he said.

For ten minutes before returning to his office, Ter

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Birgen always read the papers. Today he found it difficult to concentrate and his eyes travelled over the first page in detail without taking anything in. A voice was ringing out in his mind, filling him with bitter satisfaction, his own voice. "Major Leining, this presumptuous and tactless behaviour in public calls for condemnation in public. To atone a little for the damage you have done to our good name I must, as Commander, repudiate responsibility for the words you have spoken and the policy you implied." Then he imagined himself saying, "Go to your quarters." And he watched the proud little man go slinking out, crushed: All the time these images swept through his mind, his eyes were moving along the lines of print at a normal speed, as though they were harnessed to a comprehending brain.

The word "Indonesia" in big capitals first engaged his attention.

"CROWDS CHANT 'INDONESIA FOR INDONESIANS'

—The Hague, Wednesday."

Lower down the column there was a flimsy crosshead, "REACTION IN LONDON," and a photograph of some M.P. who had protested against the use¹ of British troops in Java; "in suppressive operations which recall the practices of the infamous 'Black and Tans.' "

The Colonel collected his stick. In the hotel entrance a group of War Correspondents were comparing purchases. One was holding up a Balinese girl carved in wood with fan headdress and sumptuous breasts. "Not bad for 10 banana leaves. She'd fetch 50 chips in Singapore. Good morning, Colonel."

The Colonel's courtesy was too mechanical and ingrained to be dropped even on the most necessary

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occasions. "Good morning, gentlemen," and then to some others walking backwards, talking to others, he said again, "Good morning, gentlemen." But they bumped into him without hearing.

When he got into his office the first thing he did was to shut the photograph album and put it away. Then he began to arrange his desk in a business-like way, thinking, 'Then I'll get down to it, then I'll get down to it.' His mind was enjoying the last precious moments of trivial preoccupation, with the last details of untidiness, when a clerk came in with a message.

It stated briefly that A Coy. had had no word from their patrol which had been sent out to Tabanan and was now four hours overdue and that many friendly Balinese said that the Pamoedas had established a headquarters there.

Two days ago this message would have relieved him a little, by providing him with a legitimate and clearly defined military task. He would have sent out a force to rescue the patrol, hoping that it would meet resistance, and that the ensuing battle would yield prisoners, information and results felt far and wide. Two days ago he would have known exactly what to do. But now he wasn't certain. Yet something had to be done. Gradually, over a period of many minutes, the room told him what—and his desk and his meaningless medals, and Leining's contemptuous face—prison and warder. Also the fact that this, in the world, was his home. His manners, all he had to cling to for support, told him what to do : something that might pass as extremely gracious, as conduct becoming an officer of the old Army. By the last moment of his life he would become for the first time a good advertisement for his caste.

In a civilian car, with a Japanese driver, he set out

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for distant Tabanan. To Leining, on the steps of the headquarters before he left, he gave explanation and instructions. Tact, he said, must be tried first. They were a simple people and could be talked over. If anything happened to him he suggested other means should be adopted—but, anyhow, he left that to Leining. If all went well he would be back in a few hours.

But the Colonel went to distant Tabanan with every intention of not coming back.

For the first hour he sat engrossed in peace of mind. His shrivelled heart went out to the people by the way, in what seemed to him the first moment of intimacy he had ever experienced. In convention to the most informed opinion he had often dryly spoken of the beauty of Balinese girls, today he felt it. He noticed their heart-shaped faces, their broad sultry mouths and their hawkswing eyes, quiet and satisfied; he noticed their breasts as something that had come right in the world; he noticed the young mothers had satisfied yet paradoxically virgin eyes. His heart went out to them, apologising for its dryness in the past, for its occasional formal lust and nothing else. His heart went out to the naked children under hats like reversed waste-paper baskets, who from squatting daily in open grassland had become nearly as dark as their charges, the lugubrious, plodding buffaloes. His heart went out to the men preening proudly their fighting-cocks, which had a way of crowing and standing as though they were conscious of their gladiatorial destiny. His heart went out to the temples in forest clearings, the light spearing through the trees, the shadows so often with living charges, the wayside shrines freshly remembered with flowers, his heart went out to life watching him pass, oblivious of the choice he had made, of his

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destiny. There was a great sweetness in his dread. He was going to his Jerusalem.

He had fallen into such a melancholy satisfaction with roadside scenes that only when they took on a striking unfamiliarity did he stop the driver and walk out at a cross roads and look down two roads that turned into grass tracks after a hundred yards, and realise that he was lost. Mellow flutings of birds nearby and the jovial cries of distant monkeys succeeded the noise of the car in his ears and his brief exaltation crumbled into the trivial preoccupation and uncertainty, which he knew so well.

"Did you go through Sanoer?" he asked in Dutch, Malay and English. Each time the driver replied quickly in Japanese interspersed with grunts and hissings, sounds denoting the extreme of deference. With his hands pressed to his sides, elbows slightly bent, bow-legged and egg-pated he looked completely oval.

The Colonel shouted at him, pointed, required him to point. The Jap eventually lapsed into hopeless gestures and an occasional outward hiss and nodding of the top part of his body. He looked as though he expected to be hit.

The Colonel got back into the car and made signs to turn round and go back. The first movement was jarring and accompanied by a hollow crumpled sound. That was the first puncture. Two hours later, in darkness, still seeking a familiar way, they had another puncture. In the early hours of the following morning on the last drop of their petrol they reached headquarters.

The sun was just up, but a crowd of soldiers, vehicles and ambulances thronged the front court. Among them, conspicuous as always by their dejection,

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uncertainty and untidiness, were prisoners covered by guns.

The Colonel's car could not get in for the coming and going of people and vehicles. It was slowed to a standstill in the gateway.

The Jap driver's officious hooting on behalf of rank was lost in the general hubbub. For a while the Colonel sat, peering apathetically through the windows. He was unshaven and bleary eyed. Eventually he got out. People preoccupied with errands jostled him. Rifle bolts rattled in unison: triggers clicked confirming emptiness, completion, achievement. Stretchers were negotiated through knots of people. Some Eurasian children were standing with ageless calm round one small boy who had shed all his tears, but was still abandoning himself to as much bewailing as breath would allow. Above all the noise of orders, grief and consolation, and metallic, mechanical movement, a high-pitched precise voice was thriving. "Wait, Frau Helling, I shall need all the civilians except the children and the stretcher cases for interrogation. Major Landers, provide escort for the prisoners, then march your company off. Lieutenant Konig, the vehicles are getting mixed up. Get something done about it." Leining was happy.

The Colonel was turning from all this activity in which he had no place when a hand grasped his arm above the elbow. "Oh, Colonel, I am relieved and my wife will be relieved. We heard you were missing—having gone to Tabanan by yourself and not come back. We waited up late. This morning my wife sent me for news while it was still dark. I heard them coming back and I thought they would have news of you. But they could tell me nothing. I feared the worst."

Enthusiasm, like the expression of opinion, was a

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rare event in the old artist's life. It was occasioned in him now by something more than politeness. It was not feigned—true, he was glad to drop it and say cynically, "Let us get out of this place, where something has been done!" He could never resist making motifs of phrases which had a recurrent potential of irony. 'Something has been done.' The Colonel was past being hurt by this unintentional mockery. With weary indifference and knowing the answer, he said: "What has been done?"

The artist looked at him in surprise. "You were not there?"

"No, I wasn't there. Please tell me what happened."

The artist looked puzzled, then he gave the news, speaking slowly and with a hint of satire. "They have found your patrol in little bits all over the ground—and some Eurasian women and children in little bits with them, all many hours old in the sun, a sort of pot pourri of Dutchmen one might say—then Leining, it seems, administered a lesson to the neighbourhood. Something has been done. But not finished."

In his life the old artist had so often been thoughtless when he was most enjoying the sound of his own voice. He had so often said 'the wrong thing' that he was practised in recognising its effects. There was something wounded about the silence of the man beside him, he feared lest he had said more than he knew.

"You had a narrow escape, Colonel," he said, touching him on the arm.

"No," replied the Colonel, "I had no escape."

The noise of the wailing child, of Leining's voice and the great coming and going of people and vehicles grew faint.

They walked on, the old artist feeling all the time

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the silence of his companion, examining it, trying to recognise it in the clearness and humility which must go with sympathy. He was frightened of being blunt with this soldier, of asking him simply for an account of what had happened. He guessed that question would be either painful and superficial or too large and deep to be readily answered by that disciplined man.

They walked under the trees alive with the song and movement of birds, past a wall with a nationalist slogan, along the shadow of the Dutch flagstaff, slanting far in the early sun, past a beggar with a leg like a brown bolster covered with red rents; they walked on in silence, the old artist looking precisely, without change of expression, at the objects which they passed, giving, he supposed, the most cantless sympathy by seeming to say, "See, that exists, and that, and that!"

Michael Croft

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“ . . . It being merely one way of communication between the lost and the lost. . . . ”

(*The Man Without a Nation*)

“ **I**t’s like going out into a blizzard after everything’s still,” Tony had said. And the sailor hadn’t been sure, but he felt that Tony knew and now he was going to know himself. Because it had happened before in an exploding night of gunfire and pain, a long time ago. He had never known it could happen like this. Because he had been his own sure Gibraltar, he had had no need to know.

So he looked at the cinema adverts, but he was seeing only the darkness that was past and his mind was remembering. The three days’ friendship and the history that had frozen and stopped. The ship creeping in through fog and ice and the backstreets and the sudden bootleg meeting and the sudden certainty. Talking and drinking. The frozen snow in the streets and the wind that swept through the shop doorways and up the sleeves of his overcoat. And Tony, fair-

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haired, laughing, blue eyes restless in the dark, and everything frozen and still, and saying he was frozen and he wished he had somewhere to go. The Canadian *matelot* cursing the Liquor Commission, saying the town was drier than a dead whore. And Tony saying he came from Cape Breton. "They don't ask you to make way when they want to get past—they ram you out of the way with a fist like a saw-mill." And saying how he hadn't known a thing till he went to sea. And how he got in with the crowd and learnt the lingo.

And on the first day he had felt the breeze in his face. And on the second day he was caught in the breeze and he was no rock now, he was adrift. And on the third day . . .

It was then half-past one and the moon, remote and cold, lay along the sea like aluminium. In the distance, across the bay, like stars, a ship's lights flickered, but there was no movement. Only the white clouds on the horizon moved, smooth and unhurried as sails. The sea was dumb and placid, aware of time on its shoulders. Winter had gripped the night and the town was a limb lopped off from a glacier world where the blood ran back on itself. The sailor pulled his collar closer about his ears, but it gave no warmth and his woollen gloves were like paper over his numbed fingers.

"The gales have started up north," Tony said. "Two ships went down yesterday. One got cut clean in two."

"How many came back?"

"They all went down," Tony said. "You've no

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chance in those old crates. Like trying to stop a tree after it's started falling."

They walked down into the town in silence. The sailor wanted to talk, but the silence was a threat that must not be defied. At last the sailor spoke.

"You got something on your mind?"

Tony looked at him quickly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have. Sorry I've been so dumb."

"That's all right," said the sailor.

They walked into the main street and went inside the cable office. The night attendant came out rubbing his eyes. Tony started writing out his cable.

The office was warm and stuffy. The sailor unbuttoned his overcoat and leaned against the radiator. The oppressive silence of the office was broken when the door opened violently and a man stepped in singing softly to himself. He walked up to the counter and took down a cable form. He saw the sailor and began fumbling in his pocket. At last he pulled out a half-bottle of liquor.

"C'n you finish this off?" he said. "It's Jamaica."

The sailor took the bottle from him. "Sure thing," he said.

"That didn't come from the Liquor Commission," the man said.

The sailor sniffed at the rum, then took a sip.

"Just the gear," he said. "No. I guess that didn't come from the Liquor Commission. Christ, I felt like it. How much do you want back?"

"Take the lot," the man said.

The sailor drank a half then passed the bottle to Tony. "That's good stuff," he said.

"Jamaica?" said Tony and took a swig from the bottle. "Yep. That's Jamaica all right. That didn't come from no Liquor Commission."

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The man took the bottle off Tony as he finished drinking and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. He kicked the basket under the counter.

"Thanks a lot," said the sailor.

"O.K. bud. That's O.K." The man went on writing.

Just before three o'clock in the afternoon Lew arrived.

"I'm sorry. I can't come to the movie," he said. "They've just rung up from the hospital and my aunty's expected to die this afternoon."

"How long shall you be?" Tony asked.

"I could be back in a half-hour. I only have to go up and have a look at her. Can't you come up?"

"O.K. We'll come up."

They crossed the road and went up towards the Institution Hospital.

"They said she should be dead by three o'clock," Lew went on. "Well, it's three o'clock now, so I should be able to go to the movie."

"We'll give it a half-hour," Tony said. "There's a hell of a line for the movie."

"I hope she's not going to be hanging on in fits and starts," Lew said. "She's been in for two months now. She was very fond of me and believe me, once that will's read, little Lew will look like something Halifax just hasn't seen."

They reached the hospital. "You two can sit in the lounge," Lew said, "I've got to start crying." He went over to the sister in the reception office and she led him

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away up a flight of stairs. The sailor and Tony sat down on a couch in the waiting-room.

The room was dark with shaded lights and dark green chairs. Across the windows were dark green curtains which prevented any light from reaching through. A bowl of faded holly leaves stood on the small table in the centre of the room. There was an atmosphere of death in the room, as of a corpse or of a man about to die. It seemed to be in touch with death and made no attempt to deny or conceal the work which was done in the rooms beyond. The sailor thought of other rooms where he had waited, where men lay dying, not so dark as this, not so quiet, not with the gloom and the loneliness of this room. Here you were compelled to think about death as the priest at confession made you think about sin. The sailor had never concerned himself with death. He had seen it happen so quickly and so violently he hadn't had time to think about it. A door opened and a nurse came in. As she glided across the room she seemed to belong to it, was already in loving touch with its passages of death. Her cheeks had no colour and only her legs moved. Her arms and her face were stiff and she saw only in front of her; she had no life of her own. The sailor turned and spoke to Tony.

"I don't like hospitals."

"No," Tony said. "They make you think too much."

They sat in silence staring at the shrivelled leaves on the table.

"You're definitely leaving tomorrow?" the sailor said. "You've got to go?"

"I've got to. This is my only chance. If I don't go now I'll never get there. And you go out at the weekend?"

"Yes," said the sailor. "That's the way it is."

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Lew came down and began talking about his aunt.

"I can't start crying yet," he said. "She's still hanging on. All the relatives are there. They looked as if they were going to die themselves when they saw me."

"Is she awake?" said Tony.

"She's been unconscious for thirty-eight hours."

"What's wrong with her?" asked the sailor.

"Cancer." Lew drew his hand from his neck to his stomach. "She's got it from here to here. I only pray she doesn't start the death rattle when I'm there. I just don't want to hear that. We used to hear it every day and all night long over there when the boys were flying back. I couldn't take that again."

"Tony," Lew went on, as they walked into the street, "you mustn't go away before the funeral. I must have you here for that. It'll be the social event of the year."

"Sorry, Lew, I shan't be able to stay. I wish I could. What will you wear?"

"I'll have a special outfit made. I'll give the town a treat. You ought to stop for the funeral, Tony. Poor mother," he added. "She's been waiting up there since yesterday morning. And I've got the house al' to myself."

"That's beautiful," Tony said, starting to laugh. "That's terrific. Mother's waiting there at a death-bed and dear little Lew is away home making whoopee. That really is lovely."

"My mother never had a son in her life," Lew protested. "I was adopted," he explained to the sailor. "That's why all the relatives don't like me. What time is it now, Tony?"

"I don't know," Tony said. "What about a drink at Mackie's before we go to the movie?"

"O.K. Let's go. Oh, boy, am I looking forward to

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that funeral. You must stay, Tony. I'm going to give the gang the best treat they've had since I pulled Norma's pants down outside the public library on VE Day."

Tony started laughing again. "Aren't we terrible?" he said, turning to the sailor. "Don't you think we're disgusting? Aren't we heartless?"

He went on laughing, half-hysterically, then suddenly he stopped. "It's all you can do," he said. "You can't help laughing. We've seen so many things broken up. What else is there . . .?"

They turned into a side street and came to Mackie's shop. It was a shop where you could buy anything, groceries, hardware, periodicals, patent medicines. It was small and dirty and the goods in the window had been thrown in without any intention of tidiness. Everything was covered in dust and gave out a dry stale smell which was soon lost in the warm smell of cooking coming from behind the curtain at the end of the shop's high counter. In the window a large white cat and five black and white kittens were playing amongst the tinned goods. At one end of the counter an old man was counting out one-cent pieces.

Mackie came out from behind the counter and squinted at the sailor and Lew and Tony as though he didn't know they were there.

"Hiya, Mackie," said Tony. "Can we have three cups of tea? And I'll have an egg sandwich."

"You eat too much," Mackie said. "You do everything too much."

He broke two eggs and fried them on a small grill under the counter. He was about forty and fat and brown-faced with brown eyes that sparkled so that he could never look really serious. He spoke like a half-caste and he was badly in need of a shave.

"When you going to Montreal?" he asked Tony.

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"I'm going tomorrow."

"You sure?" said Mackie. "You never made up your mind to anything yet."

"Yeah! I'm going tomorrow."

"You want to start working now. Stop the street play."

"Don't worry, Mackie. I know what I'm doing now."

"Yeah! You know too much."

Tony picked a kitten up from the window-ledge and began caressing it on the counter. "What is it?" he asked. "A bitch?"

"Yeah. You like the females, eh?"

"Sure thing," said Tony.

"I know just how it is. You get on with the females all right. You understand them all right. You know plenty about the females."

"Sure thing," said Tony.

Mackie picked up two doughnuts from the shelf behind him. "Have one," he said to Lew.

"No, thanks, Mackie."

"Come on. A man not working wants to eat. Come on. You eat this."

He gave a doughnut each to Lew and the sal'or. "Not you," he said to Tony. "You got egg sandwich."

The old man in the corner was still counting his one-cent pieces. "What's all the pennies for?" Tony asked.

"They go to Salvation Army. You out of work, they feed you. You got money, you give them. Feed someone else. I know."

They finished their tea and went out.

"Thanks, Mackie," Tony said. "See you again."

"You take care. Don't be too clever."

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"Mackie's all right," said Tony, when they were outside.

"He's wise," said Lew.

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Then they come out of the cinema and it is half-past ten and there is no moon and there are no stars and the only lights are the street lights and the cold is laughing at him and creeping through his overcoat and under the scarf around his neck and tearing like hooks at his ears.

Lew says he must remember to ring the hospital and then he says he's got no cash for supper, but Tony offers to pay.

The sailor wishes he had some liquor inside him and he says what about the Liquor Commission; but there's nothing to do about it because he's got no money to go looking for any more bootleg stuff. Tony says the only thing is to go to the Chinese Restaurant so they move off there.

When they sit down Tony starts the juke-box and it is the 'Happy Land' again. They start crooning the words and the sailor wonders if they mean anything, because just then they seem to mean a lot of things, but he doubts if they really mean anything because somebody just wrote them to make a couple of hundred quid and some pale-faced son of a bitch with a silk handkerchief and scent behind his ears is crooning them to make a few more easy quid. "There's a happy land," he sings, "and it's just a prayer away," and he wants to believe it but the bit about the prayer stops him because he was never any good at prayers, anyway.

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Then Lew talks again about ringing the hospital and then he gets excited because a merchant seaman has come in and he says it's a very old friend of his called Sheppeny, and Tony says he may get some liquor.

Lew goes over to talk to Sheppeny, then Sheppeny goes out and Lew says he'll come back later but he doesn't know if he'll get any liquor. So they wait till nearly twelve, then they go over to Simón's Café. Sheppeny doesn't turn up for another quarter of an hour, so they have to start drinking coffee again, and when Sheppeny comes they order more coffee, so that they can sit talking. Lew and Sheppeny are talking quietly together and then Lew says to Tony it's a pity but Sheppeny couldn't get any liquor.

Then Sheppeny starts bragging about the rum rackets they used to work on the Colon run, but that doesn't make the sailor feel any better and he's glad when Tony says they might as well go on to the American Grill. But Lew says he'd rather go somewhere else, then he says he still hasn't rung the hospital and Tony snaps back that if it was his aunty who was dying he wouldn't sit talking about it but he'd be there.

They move down Barrington Street. The streets are still not empty. Somebody is singing not far off.

They turn down a side street and there's a Merchant Navy officer standing at the bottom. He watches them as they come down, then he walks slowly away and goes into Gordon's Café.

Lew and Sheppeny walk on together and go into a shop doorway, but the sailor feels too cold and tired to take any notice of them. He stands by the lamp-post at the street corner waiting for someone to suggest something.

Tony hasn't said anything for the last few minutes, then he turns and says in a loud voice he's beginning

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to feel sick in the stomach. The sailor doesn't know what's the trouble so he grunts and says nothing.

"Do you get my drift," Tony says, "I'm beginning to feel sick." Then he calls down the street to Lew to come out of the doorway and he starts off cursing him at the top of his voice. He's really mad. He's tense and keyed up so that the sailor thinks he's going to hit Lew, and his voice is harsh and right out of control.

He calls Lew a lousy swine and a lot of other names and the sailor kicks himself for being dumb because Tony knew that Sheppey had a bottle all the time, but wasn't bringing it out because Lew didn't want him to. Tony goes on cursing and the Merchant Navy officer comes out of the café doorway and stands listening to him.

That's the lousiest bloody trick you've played on me yet, he tells Lew, and Lew looks frightened, although he's bigger than Tony and he says there was only one bottle, and they wanted to have it between the three of them.

Then the sailor feels mad, too, because he's been the cause of the trouble and he feels mad with Lew because he hadn't thought he was like that. But Tony goes on at him and asks him if he'd ever worked a trick like that. And he says that he might not be much good but he's still got some principles about him and he'd never try to elbow Lew's friends out of a drink.

And right in that moment the sailor forgets he's tired and he forgets Lew looking mean and ashamed and everything stops; just in that moment something has opened out and he doesn't know what it is, it's so sudden it might be a mirage, a meadow growing out of an icefield or a fire burning, something he can't explain, never could explain, but it's happened like a vision or a dazzling sign.

Then Tony tells Lew he might as well beat it, because

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he doesn't want to touch the stuff. What do you think of that, he says, and Lew doesn't say anything, but walks away with Sheppey. Tony goes on cursing Lew, because he's that mad and he says he's been keeping Lew for the last two months.

The sailor doesn't know what to say and he tells Tony to forget about it, but Tony says he can't forget it and he's had one row with Lew and this is the finish this time. Then the Merchant Navy officer comes up. He's got a Swedish cap badge and he wants to talk. Tony snaps at him to clear off. The sailor asks Tony where he thinks they should go, but he says he doesn't know and he doesn't much care. He's still mad and the sailor tells him to forget it. He says he hadn't even noticed what was going on and Tony says he can smell that kind of thing a mile off and with Lew, five miles off. He starts apologising and the sailor tells him, for Christ's sake, not to worry.

So they walk back to the end of Barrington Street, then they stop at the corner to say good-night and they fix up to meet in the morning before Tony goes.

And the sailor can't say what he wants to say because there'll be no point in it and anyway he doesn't know what he wants to say, he only knows this: how things have to be. But he knows that Ton' understands, though he doesn't say anything, and they haven't got to talk about it, though he knows, and he's sure that Tony knows, this isn't served up on gold plates when someone rings a bell, and it doesn't come with looking, because your heart can be as big as an explorer's who keeps on trying, though he never finds anything, and you'll be just as beaten as him, and it doesn't come with waiting, because you can wait a lifetime and it may never happen.

And he finds himself thinking about Father

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Christmas when he was a kid, and he starts laughing to think how his mother used to take him into the big store at home, and every year he'd give Father Christmas his letter saying what he wanted, and each year there was something about his eyes, no matter how blue or how kind they were, which seemed to be laughing at him when they looked down into his and telling him that the whole thing was a lie and he'd never really get anything. But when Tony wants to know what he's laughing at he can't explain.

At last he says good-night and goes back to his ship. It is nearly two o'clock and everything is dark as he gropes his way past snoring hammocks until he finds his own. His hand touches something wet on the blanket, and it is where somebody has been sick after the bootleg hooch. He is too cold and fed up to care. He strikes a match and reverses the blanket, then he lays his overcoat over the clean part and turns in.

He tries to go to sleep, but it's no use. He wants to stay but he knows that he mustn't. He's tired of the sea and moving about. He wants to rest for a while, to think for himself, to sort things out and know where he's going. Keep moving, that was the best way, never stop too long, never let anything get a hold of you, laugh and keep moving. That was all right in the daytime, but it wasn't all right at night when you had to lie still and you couldn't laugh to anyone except yourself. Keep moving. Yes, that was all right, but where did it get you in the end? You make your own life, but suppose you found something worthwhile, what did you do then?

• • • •

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They ordered more tea and Tony put a five-cent piece in the juke-box. "I'll get the Happy Land," he said.

They started singing the refrain.

"There's a happy land somewhere,
And it's just a prayer away,
And I know I'm going to get there
To that happy land some day.'

"Lousy tune," the sailor said.

"Corny," said Tony, and went on singing. When the record finished the sailor asked him, "What sort of a place is Montreal?"

"Very gay," Tony said. "It's got the gayest main drag in the world."

"When they've taken the snow away I might like the place."

"You might, but you'd soon be tired."

"Easy for getting jobs?"

"Not now. The town's full of bums."

"I can look after myself."

"I'll believe that."

"Will you be going round with a crowd at Montreal?"

"Not if I can help it. I want to work. I've got to make a career. I shall wear dark glasses, carry large books under my arm and look very serious."

"I can imagine it."

"I shall try to anyway. It's no use if I don't go through with it. I want to set up on my own. What about you? Will you stick the Navy?"

"This is my life, I guess."

"Yep. I know what you mean."

"You must come over to England sometime when

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you've finished your exams. and I've got long leave."

"You say the word and I'll be over."

So they stand on the station platform watching the people who have just come in off the big passenger liner, and everywhere there is an air of hustle and of a need to be getting somewhere. These people, the sailor thinks, are all here with a purpose, they've got a place to go to, a job to do, Montreal, New York, Vancouver, they're all going somewhere. But are they, he wonders, are they really going anywhere. Maybe they're just kidding themselves, too. But the trains, the iron spokesmen, roar out at him that this is not so. The trains understand, and they are hungry, too, with the same enormous need, armoured and huge, unloving as prisons, but with a wolf's appetite, fearless and tense, for the tick of a clock, the shot of a gun, a whistle's screech, and then away, arrogant and sure, head thrown back, nothing caring, nerveless and free for an orgy of space, a five-day riot . . . Montreal, New York, Vancouver . . . what does it matter . . . a name is only a breathing-space . . . you are empty, and rest, and then, impatient, you are off again.

And as he listens to the engines letting off steam they sound like all the ships' sirens he's ever heard when he's been leaving a place where he wanted to stay. And he knows that those trains are going to go out roaring and charging across the snowdrifts and over a thousand miles of white prairie, not caring what they destroy or carry away. And he wants to say that he'll jump his ship and come to Montreal, but he's got to go on being hard and he can't say

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it. And he knows that Tony won't say it, because Tony understands this better than him and can see more than he can see.

Then Tony says he feels like he was going out into a blizzard after everything was still, and the sailor nods, but he doesn't know what to say. Then Tony laughs and asks him to give his love to Piccadilly Circus and he says he will, and he tells him not to come over in those deadly Canadian clothes. And Tony says he'll wear a dark blue suit and a stiff collar. Then he knows that he can't stay any longer, and he asks Tony if he minds, and takes his hand and tells him he's a great guy and he's not to forget to write. And Tony says he won't, and it's been great knowing him, and he'll be seeing him again, and the sailor says he'll be seeing him all right and he knows he never will, and it's been great knowing him, and then he turns to go. But he still had to turn round and tell Tony to be sure and pass his exams., and he waves back and says he'll be sure, and the sailor comes out of the station and mechanically he buys a paper and opens it to the cinema adverts.

But in his mind he has a blurred picture of many ports and many faces, distant and half-forgotten, the true and the weak, the fly-by-nights and pretty ones, the sad and the drunk, white and brown, half-caste and black, faces in Durban and Sydney and Beirut and Madras and many others in many places, and faces from childhood and green fields, familiar and laughing, and always one face, stabbing through an aching mist, endless over oceans, approaching and receding, the face of a girl, sneering, pursuing, merciless. And the dark curtains of a room come back to him and the damp feel of grass in a continent a door away. Then another picture comes of a ship and

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a man beside him who is bleeding and dying, smiling from a white blanket, and Father Christmas is looking down at him and smiling from a cotton-wool beard. And he turns, expecting to see a blizzard coming up behind him, and, without knowing it, he tightens the scarf about his neck and turns up the collar of his coat.

Patrick Gardiner

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"They let light and air play always upon their selves, and consequently have grown very lustily, but have at the same time achieved health and strength in their growing. Whereas our wrappings and bandages have stunted and deformed ourselves, and hardened them to an apparent insensitiveness . . . but it's a callousness, a crippling, only to be yea-said by æsthetes who prefer clothes to bodies, surfaces to intentions."

T. E. LAWRENCE—*Letters.*

GRISELDA EMMETT felt a faint sense of dizziness as she rose from the armchair.

"Yes, Mrs. Keyes."

The authoritative voice continued from the top of the banisters, raised a little, more querulous:

"Griselda!"

She ran through the door into the hall. "Yes, Mrs. Keyes, I'm here."

"Why can't you answer the first time?" said Mrs. Keyes, "I have a sore throat this morning and shouting doesn't do it any good."

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Griselda attempted to apologise, but Mrs. Keyes interrupted her, petulantly: "Now listen to me. Last week I gave instructions that in future you were to make yourself responsible for the children's laundry. It was a small extra duty and I expected you to carry it out without difficulty. To-day, as I think you are aware, is Tuesday—the day on which the laundry van calls. I have just been through the basket on the landing and I can find no trace of any clothing belonging to either John or Richard whatsoever." Mrs. Keyes' face peered over the banisters: Griselda noticed her mouth, square, oracular, as it formed the inevitable question: "Have you any explanation to offer?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Keyes, but I forgot."

"Forgot!" exclaimed the voice above her. "You're always forgetting. One of these days perhaps you'll learn that governesses are employed to remember small things, not to forget them. Fetch the laundry at once."

"Yes, Mrs. Keyes."

Mrs. Keyes' steps retreated into one of the bedrooms. Griselda sighed as she returned to the room which had been allotted to her. It was a small bed-sitter, without much furniture, but studded throughout with small ornaments, photographs and knick-knacks. The only thing lacking, she reflected, were pictures of Highland cattle on the walls—then the illusion of a boarding-house would be complete. She looked ruefully at the armchair she had just left, with the faded Boots' novel she had been reading left open upon it. Then, curling her pale unrouged lips down at the corners in an expression of almost childlike disgust, she went across to the large bay window, and looked out.

The garden was not a large one, a patchwork of

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cabbages and gooseberry bushes which ended in a stout wooden fence. Her eyes noticed Clem, the gardener, spreading manure upon one of the beds with a fork, before they passed on over the fence to the slope of green hill beyond.

This afternoon it looked strangely beautiful in the clean sunlight of early spring. Even the tents of the military camp, which had seemed so grey and bleak when they had first been put up in the drizzling rain of a week ago, now took on a decorative quality, their long shadows retreating across the turf. Only the great corrugated iron shack of the cookhouse, just beyond the garden fence, was still unsightly.

As usual there was the familiar group of khaki-clad figures collected at one end of it. One or two were peeling potatoes and throwing the discarded skins into a great vat, the gleaming fragments catching the sun for a second as they flew through the air. Others were collected round a large fire. One man, in shirtsleeves, seemed to be collecting faggots from a copse a short way up the hill in order to feed the fire, and it was upon him that she found her attention concentrating.

He was of medium height, with fair, rather curly hair, and a fresh pink complexion. She noticed the muscular wiriness of his body as he ran up the slope to collect more wood, the easy movement of his limbs, the brightness of the sun on his arms with the sleeves rolled up, and the hands slightly clenched. For a moment he bent down, gathering sticks, and then, as he straightened himself and, swinging round, came running down with the wind in his hair and his face, incredibly young, glowing in the sharp air, she experienced a sudden qualm, half sickness, half delight, an agonising intermixture of horror and exaltation

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which forced her back from the window. She clutched the arm of a chair with one hand, so faint did she feel.

Raising her eyes, she saw the clock. It was a quarter to ten. Lessons began at ten, and in the time remaining to her she remembered she had got to collect the boys' laundry and pack it into parcels. With a sense of shock she realised Mrs. Keyes was calling her.

"Yes, Mrs. Keyes, just coming."

That morning passed slowly. Once the first two weeks spent in her new job had gone by, once she had lost her initial nervousness and fear, once it had become obvious to her that there was nothing in her strange occupation with which she was incompetent to deal, provided that she made the necessary effort, an acute feeling of depression and ennui had settled over her thoughts like a mist, and the leaden routine of each day, unchanging, unbroken, had the effect of exacerbating her melancholy. The whole atmosphere of the house, set in a small, uneventful Worcestershire village, was of another age. Sometimes, in the heavily curtained children's room, she felt as though she were seated in a stationary railway carriage, and that outside the landscape moved past the windows on either side of her, giving the impression that it was she who was moving, but in fact leaving her at a standstill in her cosy, cushion-filled compartment, while from the walls the suave countenances of a more stable century glared down at her in reproach.

Perhaps the meals were her greatest torment. Certainly, on this particular morning it was lunch that she had feared above all while teaching the boys their lessons, and, when the gong resounded throughout the house, she sighed resignedly as she made her way to the dining-room.

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Mrs. Keyes, whose husband had died many years before the war, prided herself on the little circle of friends she had built up in the village. To-day she introduced the children and Griselda to a Miss Banbury, a large woman of about sixty who lived nearby.

"Miss Banbury has done a certain amount of teaching herself, Griselda," said Mrs. Keyes, "she is very interested in bringing up our youth along the right lines."

"Oh, yes," said Griselda, politely, watching Miss Banbury's wide face crease into an understanding smile.

Mrs. Keyes went on: "I should like you to show her some of John's work after lunch. I think you have some views on how Latin should be taught, haven't you, Edith?"

Again the patient, understanding smile.

"Griselda's very young, you know," Mrs. Keyes continued, "and the voice of experience would prove invaluable to her, I expect. How old are you, Griselda?"

"Twenty-two, Mrs. Keyes."

"Ah, dear," sighed Miss Banbury, "a trying age for young people. They think they know so much and really know so little. Have you a degree, dear?" she said to Griselda.

"Yes," said Griselda, "I was at Cambridge." Cambridge. The hot bed-sitter, cocoa at ten, Miss Adams' 'crushes', the atmosphere of constant work mingling with the odour of starchy food—how it all came back to her. Some of the more daring girls found undergraduates to take them out in the evenings, but the majority seemed to prefer to be with their books. It was safer . . . She had left Cambridge with a second class degree in languages, and where had it taken her? To this table, listening to Mrs. Keyes and Miss Banbury

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discussing the blitz on London, and to the children quarrelling over a butter knife. She pulled herself together quickly.

"Richard, John, stop it! Take it in turns—you can't both have it at once."

Mrs. Keyes paused for a moment in her conversation, then, drawing a potato towards her mouth, she said: "Well, it certainly looks as though the Londoners can take it."

Now and then Griselda received letters from her mother in London. They never mentioned the raids, but she noticed sometimes the strained irregularity which ran through her mother's handwriting. She had reached a stage where it was impossible for her to read the papers in the morning, and when Mrs. Keyes mentioned (as she often did) the latest 'blitzes', Griselda found it almost intolerable to listen to her.

Looking back on her two months as a governess, Griselda was aware of an existence which seemed to have become increasingly circumscribed, not through any change in outside circumstances—these, indeed, had remained rigidly, continuously, the same throughout—but through the ever-narrowing field in her mind within which she could move freely without striking against thoughts and memories that had become loaded with guilt and unhappiness. The restriction was of her own making. Where, during her first few weeks, she had considered herself lucky to be out of London, 'away from it all' as her mother put it in her letters, now she found herself thinking constantly of the futility of her life in this out-of-the-way and unimportant corner of England, and gradually this feeling blended itself with an even more evil sensation of personal cowardice. Letters from one or two of her

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Cambridge friends, now working in hospitals or ministries in London, became tortures. Her life was closing in upon her like the walls of a cell described in a story she had read by Edgar Allan Poe.

Until today. From the moment she had seen the vision of the soldier running down the turf in the spring sunshine at a quarter to ten that morning, it had seemed as though one side of her life had been thrown violently into relief against the wide and shining spaces of another existence beyond and yet including her own, so that, although her life in Mrs. Keyes' house was, in a sense, rendered darker and more insufferable when seen in contrast to this brightness she had glimpsed lying outside it, yet she believed she could now comprehend it in its context and found solace in the thought that at some time it might be possible to emerge from the black shades of the present into a future dazzling in its splendour.

The bay window of her room became from then on the most significant thing in the house. Whenever she was without anything to do, especially during the lengthening spring evenings, she stood near it, looking out across the garden at the slope of hill and the tents, watching the sad, khaki-coloured figures moving sideways and forwards amongst the shadows thrown by the sinking sun, occasionally catching scraps of the broad country accent of their talk. And always it was with the clear image of the soldier she had seen that afternoon in her mind that she gazed amongst the shapes growing ever more shadowy and ghostlike in the dusk, and tried to pick out from their forms the object of the memory which had come to obsess her. At last, her eyes puckered with strain, she would draw the blackout curtains, turn into the blackness of the room and grope her way towards the electric light

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switch, hesitating for a moment before turning it on and flooding everything with its harsh, uncompromising glare.

The days now passed in a rhythm different from before. Previously she had been content to follow with mechanical regularity the course of her duties, to teach the boys from ten till one in the morning, to make conversation with Mrs. Keyes at lunchtime, and then to spend the afternoon either taking the boys for a walk or, when it was wet, teaching them drawing or fretwork. It had been possible to concentrate on each of these things, taking them in turn, without enthusiasm, it was true, but equally without a conscious craving for anything better. The words of the old hymn seemed remarkably apt as a reflection of her state of mind:

"The trivial round, the common task,
Would furnish all we ought to ask . . ."

But now, with the breathlessness of an annunciation, her vision had permeated her entire attitude to her work, and, in some indescribable way, altered it completely: If the resigned melancholy of before had been dissipated, its place had been taken by an emotion less tranquil and, in a sense, more intolerable. Where the daily lessons had been a burden to be patiently born, they now became a nightmare. One morning had been particularly unpleasant. It was a fine, mild day outside, and she had started the morning's work feeling an intense dissatisfaction with the triviality of her existence. In the middle of the geography period John, the elder of the two boys, had suddenly raised his head from his book and said in the provocative high-pitched voice of a ten-year-old:

"Please, Miss Emmett, I'm sick of this. Can't you read us something instead?"

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To which Richard, taking the cue from his brother, had added, in a voice trailing out with a prolonged whine: "Yes, read to us, read to us, Miss Emmett, please."

"Get on with your work, John," Griselda had said, sharply, but the boy's face continued to stare at her obstinately from above the geography book.

"Won't!" he said, looking at her with the small challenging blue eyes which always reminded her of his mother.

"Do as I say, and don't be disobedient," she answered. She felt herself flushing, the tide of irritation rising. She had a curious sensation that this was becoming a trial of strength. John said nothing, but closed the geography book with a snap and rested his hands on his bare knees, staring at her with a bland insolence.

She suddenly felt she could stand it no longer, and, seizing a ruler from the table, brought it down quickly across one of his hands. The boy looked at her for an instant in open-mouthed incredulity, then, with a yelp, rushed out of the room, followed by his brother, screaming. . . .

It was about ten minutes before the children re-entered with their mother. Mrs. Keyes took charge of the situation in her customary manner.

"What lesson were you taking just now, Griselda?" she said quietly.

"Geography, Mrs. Keyes."

"Well, John and Richard seem to have found it a little—shall we say—upsetting this morning. Perhaps you can take them in some other less *inflammatory* subject?"

"Yes, Mrs. Keyes."

"Read to them, perhaps?"

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"Yes, Mrs. Keyes."

She picked up *Rip Van Winkle* from a nearby table and in doing so caught sight of the expression on John's face. He had won.

And she had lost. The curious thing was that this incident did not fill her with the horror she would have experienced if it had taken place a few days ago. Indeed, it came almost as a release from the monotony of her life, a momentary escape into a sphere, outside her own, where things happened and where events were not governed by a tyranny of the usual and the expected. Evening found her, as it had found her on the previous three days, standing at the window of her room, trying, again unsuccessfully, to detect the figure of the soldier.

It was odd, she considered, as the days passed and her obsession with the camp of soldiers increased, how what was symbolic of one thing for her was symbolic of something totally different for others. Mrs. Keyes, for instance, was always complaining of the way in which the view from the house had been ruined. 'Why can't they keep the military away from quiet country places like this?' she said. 'Their great ugly tents have forced one to look out on a circus every morning instead of what used to be a lovely meadow.' And at other times: 'It isn't good for a small village like this to be swamped with soldiers. Buying up all the eggs, emptying the shops—why, it's becoming impossible to do one's shopping these days.' And again: 'I think it's all having a very bad influence on the village girls. You never see one now without a Tommy on her arm. Sometimes I tremble to imagine what goes on.' And her knitting needles clicked indignantly.

Griselda by this time had begun to learn the routine

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within the camp almost by heart. It was surprising how constant observation drew one's attention to details which a normal glance never registered. The vast number of aimless movements these troops made, for instance, the amount of standing about with no particular purpose in view that army life appeared to involve. The way they wore their caps on the backs of their heads. The regular obscenity of their language, which had at first shocked her, but to which she had grown accustomed in the end. Their ceaseless shouting at one another, their obvious enjoyment of the open air. She liked to see them washing their hands and faces in the great silver buckets, the soap lathering and frothing in the early sunlight. She liked to watch them line up for the morning exercises, shouldering their rifles and marching off, singing their songs. Above all, late in the evening, she loved to hear the fine notes of the Last Post cutting through the night air. At times, indeed, it was as though she herself was one of these soldiers, taking part in their daily routine, pulling through her rifle, loading a haversack on to her back. And then the fantasy was shattered and Mrs. Keyes' petulant voice was ordering her back to the entirely different routine of the house.

Once or twice in the morning she had caught sight of the soldier of her vision, and such an occasion was sufficient to suffuse the rest of the day with intoxicated warmth until the anguish of the evening arrived with its air of frustration and disillusionment. Then she would sit through the evening meal in a state of numb exhaustion, dully replying to Mrs. Keyes' observations on the course of the war, and afterwards would make an excuse to return to her room in order to correct the boys' work. Fortunately, Mrs. Keyes never objected.

One morning Griselda was asked to go into the

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village before lessons began to buy some postage stamps. She had accepted willingly, and the very experience of walking out of the gate on to the road leading to the village, with the shadows of great plane trees cast across it, gave her an immediate sense of freedom. She noticed how the leaves in the hedges were unfolding in great scrolls of electric green, how the fields on either side seemed to exhale in their mists the song of the larks above them, and, when she looked down at her own drab blue frock, she felt herself utterly unsuited to meet the challenge of the spring.

The walk to the village did not take more than five minutes, and it was not long before she found herself amongst the huddle of grey brick thatched cottages, crowded together at the bottom of the hill as though to shelter themselves from the wind. The post office was the first on the right. She entered and walked across to the counter.

She said good morning to the girl, and, fumbling in her bag, dropped her purse. She was about to pick it up when a voice said: "All right, Miss," and a soldier next to her bent down to retrieve it. As he straightened himself to hand it to her, she realised with a shock that she was looking into the face of the young man who had haunted her for so long. She took in at a glance an open, youthful face characterised by a pair of astonishingly wide, fair-lidded eyes and a full, slightly sensuous mouth before murmuring hurriedly: "Oh, thank you so much . . . very kind."

"That's all right, miss," he replied, in a strong north-country accent, and, taking up his cap which was lying on the counter he pushed it on to the back of his head and went out.

It was only on her way back to the house that she realised how great was the impression that this

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unexpected encounter had produced upon her. Where previously she had thought of this young man as existing perpetually in the middle distance, at a certain 'safe' number of yards away from her, she must now imagine him as the strong, rather *gauche* boy who had stood within a few inches of her nose a few minutes ago. He had become a being of flesh and blood instead of a mere phantom gambolling on the outskirts of her imagination, and occasionally verified by a glimpse from the bay window of her room. And as she strode back along the road, with the mild wind brushing gently against her face, the two impressions of him merged and filled her with exhilaration.

It was not long, however, before a dissatisfaction greater than ever started to possess her. During times when the two boys were doing work on their own she looked back on the whole episode, and, in the critical light of retrospection, the futility of the incident became plain. For where had it led her? Here she was, back in the stuffy Victorian room, with the children laboriously writing and sucking their pencils in front of her and the grandfather clock ticking away in the corner. For one moment she had been in the presence of the Real Life, the unsophisticated vitality of the open air, where Pan played and satyrs with their goat-feet danced the antic hay. But it had been for a moment only, a passing trick of time. Wearily she began to recount in her mind the incident, to go over the details, to recall the exact intonation of his voice. And gradually it grew upon her that in some way she had missed an opportunity, that she should not have allowed him to slip away so quickly from the post office with his cap on the back of his head, that she should have arranged something. But what? And how? It would have looked exceedingly odd, in the post office where every-

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one knew her, to have proposed a further meeting with a strange soldier. People would have started talking. Besides, she realised that she would never have had sufficient courage to have done so, in any case.

And now the days drifted by more slowly than ever, like the shadows of clouds she watched across the hill where the soldiers had set their tents. Her work became more and more tedious and fatiguing, a lassitude fell upon her which even Mrs. Keyes, amidst the bustle of her activities, had noticed.

"I don't think you go out enough, Griselda," she said one day. "Don't you think a little fresh air would do you good sometimes? Whenever I come into your room you are sitting at your window, dreaming. Don't think I am trying to interfere in any way—what you do with your spare time is your own affair, of course—but I can't help worrying when I see a girl looking so seedy and tired as you do."

What Mrs. Keyes had said was quite true. Griselda had been horrified by the pale, watery-eyed girl who gazed at her wistfully from every mirror, like a reproachful comment on her way of life.

One Saturday afternoon the full force of her desolation rushed over her like a wave. The week's work was finished, the week-end stretched before her, empty and meaningless as a stretch of desert sand. From the shelf books stared down, smug in their shiny leather bindings. The walls were alive with the miniature profiles of dead men. Outside the sun was shining, and a sudden gust of longing and desire swept through her. She decided to walk down to the village, and, banging the door behind her, set out along the road.

The village was crowded with soldiers. They sauntered about, gazing desultorily into the few shop windows, whistling at girls passing on bicycles, or

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stood about at corners, puffing cigarettes and chatting. At first she was overcome by a hesitation and embarrassment she could not properly understand, and wondered whether she should not turn back and go for a walk into the country instead. Then she remembered that she ought to buy some envelopes and went into the stationers'.

Coming out with the packet under her arm, she was dazzled by the glory of the afternoon sunshine. The clock opposite stood at a quarter to four. There was no need to return just yet—tea was not till four-thirty. She strolled off up the village street, jostled by the troops on the crowded pavements, the rough texture of their khaki tunics scraping against her bare arms. One or two of them grinned at her as they passed, the constant flow of their crude talk broke against her ears. She wondered, a little enviously, how many of them really knew why they were in uniform and what the war was all about. . . . The headline of a newspaper caught her eye. Another raid on London. . . .

She glanced casually into a window on her right-hand side. Teas were being served. With a sudden start she recognised a soldier sitting at a table next to the window. Her mind flashed back to the post office. She walked straight into the shop.

It was extremely full. Through an atmosphere of tobacco smoke two elderly women moved fussily, carrying trays. They were clearly unused to so much business and showed it in their anxious scurrying movements and nervous mutterings to one another. In contrast to their activity, the customers appeared almost listless, occasionally making remarks in subdued voices or pouring out cups of tea. Griselda was immediately overwhelmed by an intense loss of ease. She felt awkward and odd standing at the doorway,

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watched curiously by so many upturned faces. Her nervousness was increased by the lack of an empty table at which to sit down. She stood for a moment, uncertain and bewildered, until one of the old ladies jogged her elbow and said:

“There’s a chair there, dear—by the window.”

Confusedly she made her way to the place indicated. It was opposite the soldier. There was no way out now.

She sat down and looked about her, attempting to appear calm. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him bend forward a little to sip his tea. She felt paralysed, absurd. Why had she ever come into the shop in the first place? What on earth had urged her to do anything so ridiculous? And then, unexpectedly, he spoke.

“Excuse me, miss, but haven’t we met somewhere before?”

She turned towards him, and felt herself reddening.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Yes, in the post office . . . the other day.”

It was a lame reply, mumbled out incoherently. She had been caught off her guard; concerned with trying desperately to discover something to say which would open a conversation, she had not anticipated that he would make the first gambit.

“Aye, that’s right,” he was saying. “I remember now. ’Twas about a week since, weren’t it?”

“Yes.” She was collected now, listening to the slow drawl of his northern speech, watching the puzzled frown above his eyes as he tried to think back. How boyish he looked, she thought, how ingenuous.

“Have you been in the Army long?” she asked. It seemed an obvious question to put.

“About six months.”

“Tea, Miss, and cakes?” The elderly waitress was above her.

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"Yes, please."

"And you, Sir? Some more buns?"

He asked for more hot water. Then he went on, to Griselda:

"Six months too long, as well. By the way, Miss, mind if I ask you your name?"

She told him. "And yours?"

"Bob. Bob Smith. Mind if I smoke?" He drew a crumpled packet of Weights out of the pocket of his blouse and lit one. She observed the thickness of his fingers as they hovered above the narrow, flickering flame, the bitten nails. Then he blew out the match, and, putting the cigarette back between his lips, inhaled deeply.

"Yes," he was saying, "I reckon the Army's not the place for the likes of me. It's a deadly life, Gris, believe me."

She repressed a shudder at the abbreviation of her name. But in a sense it was rather attractive, the way he had taken her for granted like this, calling her 'Gris' as though he had known her all his life, showing no reserve or embarrassment on account of her different accent, her different 'class'. And she, in her turn, found herself quite at her ease with him.

"But it's a healthy existence, isn't it?" she enquired.
"Open air, plenty of exercise, and so on."

"Yes, it is that," he said. And, with the cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, leaning forward a little over the table while she poured out her tea, he began to tell her how he had joined up, at a time when 'things seemed bad', into a home training battalion when he was only eighteen. He was nineteen now, and was getting used to the way the Army did things. He explained to her how the small things annoyed him, the spit-and-polish, the Church

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Parades on Sunday; he told her how he hated one of his officers, how he had nearly been sent to a detention camp soon after joining up for something which he had never done. He described to her his daily routine—the routine that she had watched so many times from her window—and how difficult it had been to get up at six on winter mornings in order to do P.T. She asked him if he hoped to get any promotion, and he said that he thought he had a fair chance of becoming a lance-corporal before long. Then she asked him about his family. He told her he had been born near Keighley in Yorkshire, one of a family of six. His father used to work in a nearby factory. His mother had died when he was five, and after that they had all had to fend for themselves. In a way, he said, it had been good to get into the Army, because you didn't have to think about meals and work and things like that—it was all laid out for you. But, of course, the pay was very bad. And all the time he was talking she was watching his face as he leaned across, with his elbows on the table, and the cigarette hanging out of his mouth growing shorter and shorter until he pulled the packet out of his pocket again and lit another with the stub of the old one. She noticed how his pale hair rose in a rumpled mass above his forehead, and how short it had been clipped about his ears, noticed the narrow, puzzled brow, the blue eyes which narrowed when the cigarette smoke worried them and widened out when he was excited, noticed the open nostrils, and the strange, harsh line of the mouth between the full lips.

"And what do you do for a living?" he asked at length.

She told him she was a governess in the house which overlooked his camp. He said he had often looked at

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that house and wondered who lived in it—a bit enviously sometimes, when it was raining and his tent was leaking. “It’s bad being in tents,” he said, “but we’re shifting to-morrow. Going to a town somewhere in the north. Should be more comfortable there.”

“Shifting to-morrow!” she echoed, involuntarily using his phrase. She looked round her. The *café* was almost deserted and the two old-ladies were clearing away the last of the tea-things. She looked at her watch—they had been talking for an hour and a half.

He smiled. “You seem surprised.”

She hesitated. “No, not really. I didn’t quite realise . . .”

He leaned across the table towards her; she could feel the slight pressure of his knee against hers. “Look,” he said, “as this is my last evening, how would you like to come to a flick with me? The lads say there’s quite a good one at the local cinema this week—begins at seven-thirty.”

The village cinema—she remembered going there with Mrs. Keyes the day after she had first arrived. She had never been since.

“Well . . .” she murmured doubtfully.

“Come on, Gris.”

“Yes, all right,” she decided quickly. “I’ll come. Yes, I’ll come. But I must go back first and tell them I shall be out to dinner. Let’s meet at the cinema five minutes before the show starts.”

“It’s a date,” he said.

She arrived home to find Mrs. Keyes in the front garden, examining the primula bed.

“My dear Griselda,” she said, looking up, “where have you been? I was getting worried about you.”

“I went for a walk. I felt I wanted some fresh air.”

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"Well, never mind." Mrs. Keyes bent down to move a flower pot.

"By the way, we're having dinner a little late this evening. Mrs. Soames is coming, a very great friend of mine. She runs the village school, you know. You and she should have a great deal to talk about."

Griselda wanted to say, No, we won't, wanted to say, No, I shall be out, Mrs. Keyes. I am meeting someone in the village to-night, no, no. But instead she did not utter a word, something stood in the way, and she walked into the house.

In her room she thought, as she sat by the window: what was the point of it all really? Where would it lead? Where *could* it lead? He was going to-morrow, they were all going to-morrow, all these soldiers, all those tents and their shadows, even the great cook-house with the corrugated iron roof and the chimney forever blowing its smoke into the air like the smoke that had risen in wreaths from his cigarettes. They would never see each other again. In her mind she pictured the correspondence she would try to keep up with him, her first nervous awkward letters, and the letters he would send in reply, with their great clumsy handwriting and commonplace thoughts, Dearest Gris, hoping this reaches you, eventually trailing off, shorter and shorter, at longer and longer intervals, into nothing. Dearest Gris.

And if she did meet him at 7.25 at the cinema this evening, what would they talk about? He would lean his arm against hers during the show, and nudge her during the funny bits and whisper in her ear when his favourite girl appeared on the screen. And afterwards? What afterwards? He was a man and she was a woman. Was there any bridge between them apart from this, any common ground? Was it really so easy to escape

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the fact that she was born in Kensington and he at Keighley, that she had been to Cambridge and he had not, that she lived in this house and he lived out of doors, in that field over there, happily gossiping with others like him, while she taught little boys and made polite conversation at meals?

It was growing dark outside now, the tents and trees dissolving into the soft grey of the turf, and only the hard lines of the cookhouse still keeping their obstinate identity, dark against dark. Here and there a lighted match flared up against the blackness, once or twice a cough broke the stillness. Steadily in the corner the clock ticked on.

She glanced at her watch, it was ten past seven. It took five minutes to walk down to the village. There was still time. She could walk out of the house now, if she liked, without saying a word to anybody. There was no need to tell Mrs. Keyes where she was going. She was free after all. . . . But not so free as all that. She could not entirely avoid explaining. If she did not explain now, she would have to explain later, and it would not be so easy then, not so easy to explain why she had not been present at dinner when Mrs. Keyes had expressly told her a friend was coming down whom she wanted her to meet. If she had really intended to go out, why had she not told Mrs. Keyes when she had seen her in the front garden? That was the time to do it. Not now. It was too late now.

Twenty past. Five minutes. There was still time. She looked outside. It was quite dark now, the room was quite dark and still, only the clock ticking the minutes away, one by one, remorselessly.

Twenty-five past. Now he would be beginning to wait. She pictured him standing at the entrance in the blackout, his cigarette brightening occasionally as he

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drew in the smoke, dimming as he exhaled it from his lungs. Cigarettes, minutes, burning away. Too late, too late.

Far away, down below, the gong sounded, reverberating through the house. Half-past seven. She heard Mrs. Keyes's voice below:

“Griselda, Griselda!”

“Coming, Mrs. Keyes,” she said.

The camp moved off at half-past ten the next morning. They had started by taking the tents down, and Griselda watched them being loaded on to the lorries. Then she saw them dismantle the cookhouse and collect the kitbags into neat piles by the side of the vehicles before they put them on also. Finally the ground was tidied up, the odd scraps of wood and paper burnt and buried; the remaining soldiers climbed on to the backs of the lorries and these laboriously, like great insects, climbed the hill to the road running along its crest and disappeared beyond the skyline. The slope lay before her, empty and green in the bright spring sunshine.

Terence Watson

THE UNSEEN

THEY brought in three Americans and laid the stretchers on the ward floor. The orderlies lifted them one by one level with a bed, eased a man across, rolled back the blankets and tucked in the sides. They dumped a small pack of belongings beside each man's bed and at the foot they put a muddy tin helmet.

These Americans were called Roberts, Hendry and Duplaix. Roberts had a wound in the thigh, Hendry one in the arm, and Duplaix's head was covered in bandages. The first two were soon sitting up in bed talking cheerfully.

Roberts had a thinnish, handsome face and talked with a soft Southern accent. Hendry was a huge fellow who prattled like a child. He kidded all the sisters he was crazy about them. Duplaix neither moved nor spoke. He lay on his back and the sister fed him through a feeding-cup. Hendry kicked his blankets on to the floor and the sister patiently replaced them, but he persisted in wriggling until they came off.

For many days Duplaix remained passive, never

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speaking a word, moving only when the feeding-cup was placed to his lips. We could only guess what sort of a voice he had, and what kind of a disposition. It was difficult to see whether he was big or little. Judging by his companions, he should have been big and muscular.

Hendry, and Roberts began to get well rapidly. Hendry became more rowdy. He threw himself about, all arms and legs. "Jeez!" he used to say. "The sooner I get to hell out of this goddam joint the better it'll please this baby."

After three weeks the two were transferred to the American hospital at Oran, but Duplaix had to stay with us because he was not fit to be moved. When Hendry had gone the ward became very peaceful.

About this time they removed all Duplaix's bandages except the ones across his eyes. His minor wounds had healed well, but he was still silent and motionless.

One night we lay in bed, kept awake by the African heat, swapping stories and singing snatches of songs. The bull-frogs croaked a persistent, sombre chorus. Suddenly we heard Duplaix singing. He was improvising verses to familiar jazz tunes. We silenced and listened to him.

It was as though he had suddenly become alive. There was some sort of vitality emanating from this hitherto unknown one which eddied round him like ripples from a stone dropped in a pool. We joined in his choruses and laughed at his verses. At last he stopped singing and began to tell us droller stories than any of us had ever heard before.

It was late before we went to sleep, and the quiet was broken only by the croaking bull-frogs.

The next morning we discussed in whispers the phenomenon of the previous night, how Duplaix was

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alive again. His vitality, which showed no signs of abating, became infectious. Walking patients used to meet by Duplaix's bed to listen to him chattering.

Before long he began to tell us by our voices. We found out that at home they used to call him Babs. So we'd say, "Morning, Babs." He would reply, "Hi ya! Johnny." (Or whoever it might be.) "How ya doin'?" Then perhaps the Dook would come up and Babs, recognising his heavy tread, would call out, "It's the Dook! Hi ya, Dook! What's cookin'?"

We learned a lot about his life in America. He told us about Nosko Falls in summer, the green woods and the picnics, and the winter tobogganing and skating. He described the dances and the shows and the girls in town, the frame-house he lived in with his maw and paw, his job in the timber mills, and last of all his training with the Yank Army. He told us how he was wounded not long after coming out to Tunisia, how, after the shell burst, he thought he was spitting his teeth, when it was the splinters of hot metal driven into his mouth through his cheek.

They had taken out his right eye. Whether the sight of the other would be saved the sisters would or could not tell. Every day they removed the bandage to change the dressing and we saw his sightless left eye staring into infinity. It responded only to a bright light shone directly into it.

The hospital was an old monastery. The wards opened on to sunny white courtyards which were surrounded by cloisters. In the centre of the courtyards were beds of flowering bushes, roses and magnolia. Two languid old tortoises lumbered across the tiled paths. Sometimes we sat outside in the shade of the cloisters, reading or smoking. When we were bored we went inside and talked to Babs. Babs was a

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sort of club, a meeting-place for all the patients.

One day the M.O. said to him, "You can get up for a while this afternoon, Duplaix."

After lunch the sister helped him on with the long blue hospital dressing-gown and held her arm around his shoulders to steady him as he slid off the bed on to his feet. Then we discovered that, instead of the big fellow we had anticipated, he was of less than average height, though nicely proportioned.

He came slowly out of the ward into the shady cloisters, leaning on the sister's arm, and seated himself in the chair already placed there for him. He felt the soft feather-touch of the breeze, heard the clumsy hum of a bee blundering honey-drunk from the velvet bowl of a rose and the click-click of the two old tortoises stumping up and down.

They brought him a pile of letters that day. Mail used to accumulate and take a long time to reach the scattered units of the First Army. It took even longer if you were in hospital. Duplaix sat holding the letters in his hands for a while, relishing the feel of them. Going outside, the sister asked if she might read them to him. He smiled. "Sure," he said. "Who's this from?" He held up a large envelope. The sister opened it. A gaudy thing of coloured paper and lace tumbled out. It had a door in the centre with roses round it. Cupids held drapery and garlands. The little door opened to reveal a pair of intertwined golden hearts. Sister caught my eye and smiled.

"It's a valentine, Babs."

"From Vicki?"

"Yes, from Vicki."

He took the valentine out of her hands and ran his fingertips over the lace and the embossing. He laid it on one side. He selected a thin envelope.

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“What’s this?”

“‘V’-mail, Babs.”

“From my mother?”

“No. Mr. George Hargreaves.”

“Give me.” He put it on one side. “This one?”

“‘V’-mail.”

“Mother?”

“Mrs. Duplaix, Nosko Falls.”

“Okay. Read it, please.”

The sister read his mother’s letter to him. It didn’t make much sense to us, especially as it came out of the middle of a long correspondence.

“When did she mail that?”

Sister told him.

“Can you sort them out, sister, into the order they were written?”

There were half a dozen or so from his mother, about the same number from Vicki, two from Mr. Hargreaves, a few solitary ones and some birthday cards. The sister read him the names of the senders of the cards, then handed them to him to feel their filigree-work and tasselled silk cords.

“How old were you, Babs?”

“Twenty-one.”

When the sister had finished reading the letters to him she whispered in his ear, “Haven’t you written them, Babs?”

“Not in months.”

“Not even Vicki?”

He shook his head.

“I think Vicki’s ever such a nice girl. You don’t want to lose her, do you? Why don’t you write . . . I mean, let me write for you?”

“I dunno. Would you like to see her photo? It’s inside.”

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"You'd better go back to bed now. This is quite long enough for the first day. You can show me the photo when you're inside."

As soon as he was in bed again he stretched out his right hand to feel inside his locker. Tim, the Commando, was watching him.

"Watcher want, kid?"

"My wallet. Can you see it?"

Tim fetched out an old brown wallet. Babs took it and felt inside. He pulled out the photograph of a pretty, dark-haired girl. He handed it to Tim, upside down. The girl was standing by his side, hatless, warmly clothed in furs, against a snowy, icicle-hung landscape. She was taller than he by nearly a head.

"That's Vicki and me. Show it sister."

The sister took it. She looked at it for a while and said, "Do let me write a letter for you."

It was not difficult to understand what Babs was afraid of and why he had not written. He doubted, but we did not doubt, impartially watching, that Vicki would love him even more when he returned. If he never regained his sight she would teach him to dance so that the other dancers would never know he was blind. They would walk again across the crisp snow-fields in winter so that he could feel the crunching under his feet and the sharp air on his face. And they would go to town and listen to music together and be very happy. But we didn't say all this. We just begged him to write.

At last he agreed. The letter was composed and posted.

Mush, the Artilleryman, had suffered a great deal of pain when he first came in. Sometimes we heard him moaning softly to himself. He lay in the bed nearly opposite Babs. Babs must have felt sorry for him and

TERENCE WATSON

used to conduct long conversations with him across the room. As soon as Babs could walk unaided he said, "I'm goin' to pay Mush a call, fellers. Take me." We led him across to Mush's bed.

Babs didn't like being led, so next time Mush heard Babs say he was coming over he hollered out, "Hold on Babs, and I'll give you your direction and range. Stay where you are. Ready? Half-left turn. Five paces forward. Right turn. Two paces. Left turn. Three paces. Left turn." And Babs was right beside Mush's head. He soon learned to do the journey, and other similar ones, without direction.

One day we asked him to describe what he thought we looked like. He wasn't far wrong with most of us, but he flattered the sisters absurdly when we got him doing the same for them.

He also learned to tell the identity of his visitors by the touch of their hands. You came up silently and put your hand on his as it lay on the bedclothes and he'd call out who you were. Usually he got the name right.

I was standing outside the door of the ward chatting to the sister one evening at the time when the orange sun seemed to hesitate before it made its dive into darkness, and I asked her if Babs would ever see again.

"I don't know," she replied. "Possibly he will. He has a cataract that is nearly ready for removal now. When it's taken away he may see. I hope so."

"Will they do it here or at Oran? I'd like him to see us before he goes. Otherwise he will only remember us as voices and hands."

"I don't want him to go either. I have become very fond of him. But it would be selfish to want any of you to stay here. And anyway the American authorities

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will order his removal soon because he's well enough to travel now."

The order for his transfer came two days later. We helped him pack his kit and went down with him to the ambulances.

A terrible thing happened as he left us. He began to cry. He tried to restrain the tears, but could not . . . because he was leaving those who had become good friends in spite of the darkness, and all that would be left to him was the echo of their voices and the memory of the touch of their hands.

Miles Vaughan Williams

FLIP-FLOP

THE bell rang and there was Flip-flop. When she first came to our house she was fifteen. I remember staring at her with a cold, hostile, 'what-are-you-introducing-for?' look, as she stood unhappily at the front door. She wore a brown beret, pushed inelegantly to one side of her head, and a tight-fitting brown dress of coarse cloth. At least it was tight in places, the wrong ones, but elsewhere stood in ridges and folds, as though shrinking away from the contact of her greasy skin. There was a sort of leather belt round her waist, which I secretly decided was a strap from a trunk. She wore black cotton stockings which were wrinkled round the ankles, and darned copiously at the back. On her black shoes there were grey-blue patches showing through on the toes and on the insides of the heels, where the surface leather had been rubbed off. There she stood, a massive, quivering piece of protoplasm, the flesh oozing like a jelly out of some holes in her dress. Somewhere there were arms and a head.

"Hullo," I said, "who are you?" I was eleven years
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old. Flip-flop smiled in a far-off way. "Do you want to see auntie?" I asked. She giggled, then smiled and nodded. There was a trace of black hair on her upper lip. I disappeared into the house, and my aunt came down and took her into the drawing-room. I hovered about outside, resenting this strange creature, and tried to hear what was said. I couldn't.

At last my aunt came out smiling. "Now you must meet the family," she said. "This is my elder nephew." I hung my head, and held out an unwilling paw. Something clammy and warm closed round it, like putting one's hand into a plate of soup. But looking up I saw Flip-flop smiling at me with such friendly, frightened eyes, that I suddenly felt sorry for her, and was ashamed of my enmity.

She had evidently been engaged by my aunt, and for this I knew I had myself to blame. When I was nine my mother and father had been drowned in the North Sea, sailing in a small boat from Whitley Bay to the Broads. For two years my brother (who was now three) and I had lived with my aunt. I loved my aunt. She was a gentle, understanding creature, with a great interest in religion, but she was quite good fun all the same. She would come into our room at night and tell us all wonderful stories which she made up as she went along. She had two children, too; Sheila, aged seven, and John, aged nine, my cousins. They were very polite at first, but I don't think they liked my brother and me coming to live with them much, and they often left us to go and play by themselves, so that I had to look after my brother. I was very fond of my brother. His name was William, and he was three. But I felt sometimes that it was unfair my having to look after him so much, and I would rather have gone to play with Sheila and John. I had to dress him every

MILES VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

morning, and every day I took him for a walk, and at night I gave him his bath and put him to bed. He slept in a small room next to my aunt, and I slept with Sheila and John in a big room.

Often I got very tired of looking after William, and tried to teach him to dress himself. He was not very good at it, however, and would get muddled up, and then he would come to me with his trousers on back to front, or his head sticking out of the sleeve of his vest, and I would have to start all over again. The bathroom was downstairs, but there was a wash-basin in our room. One day I thought it would be fun to give William his bath in the wash-basin. Unfortunately the basin was not designed for such a procedure. There was a sort of sucking noise, and the whole thing came away from the wall. William slid out on to the floor, and so did all the water. Although William cried a bit from fright, he was really very good about it, and when I roared with laughter he giggled too. It really was a funny sight. The basin was leaning forward, supported by the bent lead pipes, like a drooping flower, or a wax model which has melted in the sun. The taps and plug-hole seemed to be the eyes and mouth of an empty face, leaning forward very tired, but having fallen asleep before it had time to get into bed. The room was a bit untidy and wet, and my aunt did not hide her distress. It was shortly after this that Flip-flop came.

Flip-flop's face was like a suet pudding. Her nose and eyebrows and cheeks and chin were rounded lumps which smoothed off into her head without any proper dividing line or individuality of their own. She had big white teeth, but behind them was a huge cavern, like the gates of hell you read about in the prayer-book. She worked very hard, but never got as much done as

FLIP-FLOP

she should have in the time; so my aunt said. She would throw her fat body into a spasm of energy and attack a room with a worried frown. But it never made much of an impression, and most of her effort seemed wasted, as though she were shadow-boxing with a duster. When she walked about upstairs her feet went plonk, plonk, and the whole house shook. Her shoes never seemed to fit either, and the heel would flap on the floor a long time after the toe, giving a double sound to her walk. That is why we called her Flip-flop.

Sheila and John used to torment Flip-flop. She used to become terribly anxious about finishing her work, and they would set little traps for her. She never cried, although she often looked as though she were going to. She would just look very unhappy, and say in a pleading, nasal voice, "PLEASE, Master John." Then she would go back into the kitchen, and a book, balanced on top of the door, would fall on her head.

She did cry once, though. John had been ragging her as usual, and it was the morning when my aunt went into town and she was left to do the lunch. She was never very good at it anyway. She always started everything at once, so that the whole kitchen became filled with saucepans and soup-tureens and plates and cups and saucepan-lids, and then she would not know what to do next. John would add to her troubles by pottering innocently about the kitchen, and then hiding spoons and fish-slices when she was not looking. On this particular morning we had all been drawn into it, and were stealing from a bowl filled with currants which she was going to put into a pudding. The unhappy worried expression was becoming one of despair, and she pleaded and whined in vain. Suddenly

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she had an idea. "Master John," she said, "will you go away if I give you a shilling?" John's eyes brightened, and he said, "Let's see the shilling first." Flip-flop opened 'her' drawer, a treasure-house of scraps of cloth, old postcards, and a photo of my aunt, and produced her purse. She handed John a shilling, and closed the door on us, feeling she had made a good bargain.

We all trooped out of the house and down to the little shop at the corner, which sold everything from linoleum to chewing-gum. John bought a water-pistol, and returned immediately to the attack. Poor Flip-flop. We had not been gone a quarter of an hour before a jet of water was fired in from the window and trickled down the back of her neck. She turned round startled, to see John's face grinning at her from the window. "Oh, Master John, how could you!" she said. Her face began to twitch in a funny way, and suddenly she sat down in the kitchen chair and sobbed. Even John was a little put off, and said "Sorry, Flip-flop," and looked down at his shoes. Then he flung up his head, and said "Come on, Sheila. Let's go to the wood," and they ran off down the garden. I felt very sorry for Flip-flop, and had a peculiar feeling in my stomach, like being hungry, only I didn't want anything to eat. I shut myself in the lavatory and cried.

Flip-flop became very fond of William, and even more fond of my aunt. She was happiest when we three elder ones were all away at boarding-school, and she had more peace. The holidays were a long terror to her. But later John and Sheila lost interest in her, and she was accepted as a piece of furniture in the house, and was very happy at this arrangement. She was so devoted to my aunt that she became interested in religion, too, and began to sing in the choir.

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Curiously enough, she had a very pure, strong voice, and followed the music perfectly, and the organist was very pleased.

In time, William grew up and went to school, too, and Flip-flop had to leave. I was away at school when she went, but I heard there were great scenes of crying and unhappiness in her last week at our house. Of course, I was growing up, too, and was sixteen when she went away.

After that we did not hear much more about Flip-flop, except that she was working in London, and seemed to be quite well off. I wondered what a girl like her could do in London, and, being at the age when one always thinks the worst, I imagined she was with a gang of thieves or perhaps had got caught up in the White Slave Traffic. About three years later I ran into her in Sloane Square. I did not recognize her at first. She came across to me smiling and said, "Hullo, Master Miles." She was dressed in a tight-fitting black dress and high-heeled shoes. Her eyebrows had been plucked, and were pencilled in with a thin arching line, giving her face an expression of perpetual surprise. I was embarrassed, and also was late for a lunch. I told her my aunt was very well, and that William was in the first eleven at his school. She seemed pleased, and I hurried off.

A month later I heard from my aunt that Flip-flop had called and asked to be taken back as a cook and general servant. After some hesitation my aunt had agreed, being now a little old for continual housework, and also having come into some money. So that when I went back there again, as I did about twice a year, there was old Flip-flop's familiar face answering the door, or making herself scarce in the kitchen. Her London gloss had completely disappeared, and she had

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slipped back into the rough-hewn, slip-shod beast of burden we all laughed at.

For two years all went smoothly and then war was declared.. My uncle became a member of the Home Guard, and used to spend the whole day happily cleaning his rifle. Then he went out on a night exercise, and caught pneumonia and died. My aunt carried on bravely for some months, but found being alone with Flip-flop a bit depressing. Besides, Flip-flop had become embarrassingly devoted since my uncle's death. She would spend half her wages on sweets and cigarettes, and would leave them on my aunt's dressing-table before she went home. This was awkward for my aunt, who could not allow Flip-flop to pay for them, and had to force her to accept the money for everything she had bought. Moreover, my aunt, being hard up since my uncle's death, did not want so many sweets and cigarettes. So, finally, there being a housing shortage, she decided to take lodgers. And then the trouble started.

The family who arrived were quite a pleasant family. A widow and three children. They had not actually been bombed out, but several bombs had fallen really quite close, and then there was that one which had fallen on a friend's house *only half an hour* after they'd left. Flip-flop took an immediate dislike to them. They were enemies, intruders. She began to be difficult. When she laid the table, she only laid one half, for my aunt. The others had to look after themselves. My aunt protested, and Flip-flop reformed, but was always liable to relapse. My aunt would return in the evening to find half the washing up left undone. There was a marked disparity in the cleanliness of different rooms. Flip-flop never mentioned the visitors by name, but referred to them as 'they'.

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One day my aunt went to her purse, and found she had a pound or so more than she had thought. She felt pleased, and bought herself two new packs of cards and half a bottle of gin. Later on it happened again, and she felt depressed because she was growing old, and losing the ability to count. On the third occasion she became worried, and went through all her accounts for the year. The fourth time she knew there was something wrong, as she always folded her pound notes in a special way, and she noticed that one of them was not the same. There followed a great row with Flip-flop, because my aunt was furious at her purse being tampered with, even though it was to put money in. Besides, she had to find five pounds to pay it all back.

Things slowly grew worse. There was open war in the house, but my aunt could not send the lodgers away because they had nowhere else to go. And she could not manage the house alone. The worry began to tell on her health. I happened to visit her on leave some months later, and was shocked to see how ill she looked. She was thin and nervy, and there were dark rings under her eyes. Her hand shook as she poured out the tea, and at night she would have uncontrollable fits of crying. Something had to be done.

I went into the kitchen. Flip-flop smiled and said, "How are you, Mister Miles?" and giggled in her funny way. She looked at the floor and said nothing. She knew what I was thinking. "Flip-flop," I said, "this has got to stop." Her face suddenly went black. Her fat body quivered, as though shaken by an unseen fiery wind, and the corners of her mouth drew back in a snarl, showing her beautiful white teeth. "They don't belong here," she said. "They only come and spoil everything. The house belongs to you

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and William and your auntie' and the children. I hate them."

I began to say "but they haven't done you any harm," but soon saw it was no good. I thought she must be mad, and I remembered how, soon after she first came, my aunt and a neighbour had said "a very good worker, but, of course, my dear, not quite . . ." and had nodded and had looked very wise. I went back into the drawing-room. "Auntie," I said, "you are coming away with me. We have a room empty, and you like Fifi, and you need a holiday." I went upstairs and told the lodger that my aunt was going away, and she said that was all right, she would enjoy being on her own for a bit. Then I went to the kitchen and told Flip-flop she must collect together the things she had in the house, as my aunt was going away and did not know when she would be coming back. And I gave Flip-flop all the notes I had in my wallet, and said she was discharged, and would not be required to come back any more. Then I went into the garden, and felt very manly, and breathed on my buttons and polished them on my sleeve.

A few minutes later I heard a cry, and ran into the drawing-room to find Flip-flop attacking my aunt. Her hair was down over her face, and she was beating my aunt with the flat of her hand, and she kept shouting "you shan't go, you shan't go. I won't let them win." I gripped Flip-flop from behind and my aunt got away, very frightened but very calm. Then I was going to throw Flip-flop out of the house, but I realised to my shame that she was too strong for me, and we had to send for the police.

My aunt went to stay with Fifi, and I had to return to my unit, and I heard no more for a week. But while I was walking across the Underground in Piccadilly

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Circus I felt myself plucked by the sleeve, and turning round I saw the doctor who used to attend my aunt. After a few civilities he said, "I suppose the Police got in touch with you about that maid?" "No," I said. "Did she cause any more trouble?" He looked at me through distant eyes, mistrustingly. I could feel he thought I was lying, or had in some way behaved very disgracefully. I could sense the chill of his cold, flint gaze, hostile and hard. "No," he said, "not exactly. In fact, she's dead. She poured paraffin on her clothes and set them alight." I have always been rather an emotional sort of person, and to my acute embarrassment, there, right in the middle of Piccadilly Circus Underground, I was violently sick.

John Hartland-Swann

TROUBLE IN SAN CAROLINO

IT is sometimes asked—and with justification, I feel—why San Carolino has never achieved the popularity of Monte Carlo, or Nice, or even San Remo. For, speaking as a frequent and faithful visitor, I confess I have rarely found a place which better combines unaffected charm with delightful scenery, and at the same time offers one pleasant gaiety, excellent bathing and the opportunity of parting with a few pounds in mild gambling.

Yet the fact remains—a fact that I cannot too highly applaud—that San Carolino continues to exist as a Mediterranean resort favoured by the few, rather than the many. Perhaps it is because no royal personage or dispossessed Grand Duke has, as yet, openly patronised it; or because no heavily publicised film-star has built herself a luxurious villa there, complete with rose-garden and marble swimming-bath. At all events, whether that be true or not, I must say, for my part, that whenever I can escape from the Law Courts, I betake myself to San Carolino and endeavour to repair the ravages of the legal round in the pleasant

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sunshine and invigorating air of the Mediterranean.

In view of what I have said, therefore, about the resort's comparative obscurity, it was all the more astonishing to meet my old friend Percy Jater there one fine morning, as I strolled along the path lined with almond trees in full blossom, which leads down to the Casino. He was poking at a large and sinister-looking cactus-plant with his stick as I came upon him and I had to put a hand on his shoulder before he realised I was there.

"Hallo, Percy!" I said, a trifle heartily. "What brings you from the dusty files of a solicitor's office to the flower-lined paths of San Carolino?" He started at the sound of my voice.

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Robert," he jerked out, as if caught unawares doing something forbidden. (He had known my father and for some reason always adopted the butlerish habit of calling me by my Christian name prefixed by "Mr.") And here I must pause to explain my surprise and astonishment at seeing this old acquaintance of mine in San Carolino.

Percy Jater, by now in his early fifties, I should say, had been clerk to Messrs. Merioneth, Hobday & Merioneth, an old-established firm of solicitors with whom I had—and, for that matter, still have—frequent dealings in respect of legal matters, and from whom, I may add, I have received many a remunerative brief. As far back as I can remember one always saw Percy Jater occupying a decrepit chair in the dusty outer office that acted as a sort of ante-room to Brian Hobday's own office. He was usually poring over some beribboned document, with the yellowing files and threadbare carpet forming a suitable background to the somewhat Victorian tableau. As I came in he would straighten his bowed shoulders, put down his pen, and

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with a cheery if cracked "Good morning, Mr. Robert," would pad softly into old Hobday or the younger Merioneth and announce my presence.

His head was partly bald and rather shiny with the patches of hair on either side almost dead white; his nose was thin and pointed, and carried, as often as not, a pendant dewdrop. Looking at his eyes one saw that they were pale blue and rather weak, and that his complexion was pinkish and fairly fresh—not at all dried-up or parchmenty. His figure was thin and his frame bony and, generally, the impression he gave was one of frailty and delicateness, while his whole manner was rather apologetic. Yet for all this his influence with the firm was considerable, as I had good evidence for knowing. When young Dick Merioneth was wasting his father's money on get-rich-quick schemes it was old Jater, rather than Brian Hobday, who brought him to his senses and saved him from involving the firm in serious losses—and it was not beyond his powers to advise Hobday himself on the best way to invest clients' monies and if and when to sell certain securities. Naturally, I came to consider Percy Jater as much a fixture as the old brass-faced mahogany clock that hung on the wall keeping indifferent time, *yea* in year out.

And then, one day—about six months ago, I think—I noticed Jater no longer there. I asked Brian Hobday the reason and his reply was, if satisfactory, at least rather vague. Jater, he said, had not been feeling well of late and the firm had sent him away on a long holiday for his health's sake. Whether he would recover sufficiently to resume his duties, he, Brian Hobday, could not say. After that he would vouchsafe no further information and rather obviously changed the subject. I took the hint and pursued the matter no further,

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although, subconsciously, I was wondering what was at the bottom of it.

My surprise, therefore, at seeing Percy Jater at San Carolino may be well imagined. I had not believed Brian Hobday's story about Jater being in bad health, since I have never known a man less susceptible to illnesses of any description, and eventually I had surmised that some contretemps had arisen which made his dismissal necessary. Yet here he was, looking fitter than I had ever seen him before, and clad in a neat grey pin-striped suit with a flower in his button-hole—a completely transformed Percy Jater.

"Well, Percy," I reiterated, "what has made you give up clerking and come to San Carolino? I didn't know you were a travelling man."

We had started by now to walk together towards the bathing beach.

"Ah, well," he explained quickly, "you see, I came into a little money, Mr. Robert, and decided to spend my declining years in the sun, far away from London's fogs—they catch me in the chest, you know—so I wandered around the Continent these last few months trying all the well-known places, until I found myself in San Carolino."

"And you like it here?" I queried.

"I love it," he replied. "Quiet and peaceful, beautiful scenery, no trippers, and," he added knowingly, "a nice little casino."

"Oh, ho!" I laughed. "So you like the odd spot of gambling!"

"Oh, well, only in a mild sort of way," he replied deprecatingly.

At that moment a small boy appeared displaying a mass of those garishly coloured lottery tickets which are sold in most continental towns and which are a

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cross between a French banknote of large denomination and a bogus Canadian gold-mining share. Personally, owing no doubt to some inbred prejudice, or perhaps just to insularity, I can never have any confidence either that the money you pay for your ticket gets into the right hands, or that any money is ever finally distributed. Jater, however, seemed to have no such qualms and bought about a dozen tickets at a cost of three shillings, I should say. "You never know your luck," he said half-apologetically, noticing the sceptical look on my face.

We walked on together to the bathing beach, and it seemed as if the air of San Carolino had taken the stoop from his shoulders and the hesitancy from his manner. At all events, he was obviously enjoying himself.

"Do you swim, Percy?" I queried.

"Oh, no," he replied, with a smile. "I'm so bony that I'd be shy to appear in a bathing-dress. But," he added, when we had digested the little joke, "I'm going to read my Homer whilst you give me a swimming demonstration, Mr. Robert."

"What, Percy!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "Are you a classical scholar in addition to your other qualifications?"

"Well, hardly that," he replied, "but I think I can honestly claim to read my Homer in the original, with only occasional recourse to my lexicon."

Now, I confess nothing could have more endeared the man to me. I am one of those prejudiced individuals who consider that a man—however charming his personality or sterling his character—goes through life blindfold unless he has the advantage of a classical education. The balanced perspective, the nice appreciation of all the finer things of life, the ability to single out and pursue what is really worth-while—all these

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virtues I am convinced are engendered by a proper and reverent study of the classics. But I cannot here argue the point (for I know I shall be hotly assailed), suffice it to say that it was a great joy to discover that old Percy was included in the—dare I say it?—celestial company of classical enthusiasts.

“Well, Mr. Robert,” he continued blithely, “you take your plunge in the wine-dark sea, whilst I read how Polyphemus ‘crammed out his ‘belly with mañnikin jelly’!” And without more ado he sank into a convenient deck chair, put on his rimless pince-nez and opened the *Odyssey*.

Later that evening, as I went into the Casino with the friends at whose villa I was staying, I saw Percy again. Actually, he was with friends himself and I didn’t have the opportunity of doing more than bid him good-evening. Indeed, my attention was quickly diverted by the young and attractive Marquise de Beauvallon (formerly of the *Folies bergère*), who was making what appeared to be a scene at No. 3 Roulette table. Eventually, the ever-tactful François, who runs the casino for the municipality, bore her to one side and with suave gestures and sympathetic murmurs soothed her down.

A little later, I managed to get François alone and asked him what Mme. de Beauvallon’s trouble was. He shrugged his shoulders: “She says she had 20,000 francs stolen from her bag—the money she had just won when No. 18 turned up.”

I was surprised. This was the first time in all the years I had been to San Carolino that an incident of this kind had happened in the Casino. Occasional arguments there had been, of course, over the usual

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question as to whether chips had been deposited after the croupier had called "rien ne va plus" (and the management usually gave the gambler the benefit of the doubt), but a theft "in mid-Casino", so to speak, and of this magnitude, had never to my knowledge occurred. During the next few days, however, incidents of this nature were to recur—though in different ways. There was M. Reveiller, the Paris couturier, who had an extremely valuable gold and onyx cigarette case stolen from his vest pocket; and Miss Baba Englemann, the racehorse owner and winner of last year's "Oaks", who missed a diamond-studded bracelet as she was about to "punt" at the baccarat table—and, of course, that old satyr the Moldavian military attaché, who had a wad of currency abstracted from his overcoat—currency that he had so carefully smuggled out of his own country.

Now these incidents, serious though they were in themselves, were fairly effectively hushed up by the management, and few of the main body of people frequenting the Casino knew that anything was amiss. But François realised clearly, and I realised too, that an extraordinarily clever thief was in our midst. The local police were therefore brought in to aid the resident Casino detective, and François told me confidently that it was only a matter of time before the culprit was laid by the heels. For myself, I must say that secretly I began rather to enjoy the hunt and promised myself a minor thrill when the dénouement came.

Meanwhile, I amused myself in the delightfully indolent way one does at San Carolino, bathing and sunbathing and sailing and gossiping and generally trying to forget about Rex versus Bloggs.

Percy Jater moved in and out of my landscape at irregular intervals. Sometimes I would find him sitting

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in solitude with his Homer, or some other classical author, just above the bathing beach and we would chat together about our favourite writers, rather like guilty schoolboys, I wondering how he had managed to cut himself adrift from the humdrum round of clerking and adapt himself to the life of leisured enjoyment. For it is usually the case with those who have been anchored to an office chair most of their lives (whether they be humble clerks or opulent city magnates) that they cannot adapt themselves easily to the leisured life. Once they no longer have their "work" to do—work which has loomed so important in their otherwise restricted lives—they tend to crumple up and feel miserable until such time as they can return to their desks again and restore their self-confidence and self-importance, by feeling once more in a position of active superiority. Psychologically, of course, it is an interesting and easily explicable phenomenon and I have seen it happen countless times. But Jater was different. Something—Homer, I supposed—had replaced his former life and given him the necessary repose to be quite at ease in this new life: and, of course, he always seemed to be having his little flutter at the Casino in the evenings. He gambled mildly at roulette, I noticed, and though he occasionally watched the baccarat tables he never played—or, if he did, I never saw him.

And so it seemed that life was going on rather pleasantly for us all. Personally, I considered myself very lucky: my hosts were both charming and intelligent, and possessed one of the loveliest villas in San Carolino. The "incidents" to which I have referred seemed suddenly to cease and François told me one evening that he was sure the thief had taken fright at the police precautions and made himself scarce. But

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François was wrong. Later that evening, when he was rubbing his hands and telling me how beautifully his little world was running, I saw something which told me beyond all doubt that the thief had *not* gone. It happened like this. A retired wholesale grocer by the name of Randle had appeared in San Carolino, complete with florid wife and buxom dairymaidish daughter. Now, about two years previously I had happened to defend this man in a rather notorious case in which he had involved himself with the Inland Revenue authorities over a matter of non-payment of income tax. Modesty prevents me mentioning more than that I was able to convince the learned judge that Mr. Randle was not guilty and should be restored to his friends and his relations. But, frankly, I did not like the job, and still less did I like Mr. Randle. I was none too pleased, therefore, when he approached me on the bathing beach and slapped me heartily on the shoulder, at the same time addressing me by my Christian name, as if we were life-long friends, or at least drinking companions. I endeavoured to hide my annoyance, however, and treated him as civilly as I could, emphasising the word "Mr." when addressing him by name. It had no effect, however, and I secretly hoped that either Mr. Randle's stay would not last long or that I should succeed in avoiding him. This latter hope was disappointed, however, for that very evening I ran into him again at the Casino—just as he was preparing to "punt" at the baccarat table. Fortunately, Jater was there too and I quickly introduced them and, I am ashamed to say, palmed him off on my old friend. I then rejoined my hostess, who was displaying a well-shaped limb on a high stool at the bar, and prepared to forget about Mr. Randle. But, somehow or other, my eye kept wandering back to the baccarat table. The

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crowd there, including Mr. Randle, was watching the banker intently—and then, suddenly, before my eyes I saw Percy Jater quietly but deftly remove Mr. Randle's pocket-book, extract some notes, and return it to its original place—all so quickly that I wanted to rub my eyes for fear they were deceiving me.

Jater's composure was superb, and he quickly moved away from the scene of the theft to another part of the table, where he followed the play in a nonchalant sort of way. Of course, the perpetrator of the whole series of Casino thefts became at once obvious and I had to debate what I should do. Should I expose Jater and have him arrested and probably sentenced, or . . . well, or what? What was the alternative? I obviously couldn't let it go on—and, even if I did, sooner or later the Casino detective would probably catch him. In point of fact, I could at this moment see that worthy having a heart-to-heart talk with François in the corner of the room, and I anticipated a lively scene when Mr. Randle discovered his loss—a scene which would doubtless amply repay me for the latter's familiarity and bumpitiousness towards me. However, I realised something had to be done, and done fairly quickly, if events were not to move too fast for me.

Jater, I noticed, had by now vanished—doubtless to avoid being caught with the money on him if a search of everyone present were ordered.

I made an excuse to my hostess and left the Casino as unobtrusively as possible. Outside, it was a brilliant moonlit night and as I walked along, inhaling the subtle pine and flower scents on the evening air, I tried to make up my mind as to the best course of action in the circumstances. I made my way to the Pension where Percy was living, and found him standing at the

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bottom of the garden in a sort of lemon-grove, surveying the placid waters of the Mediterranean now shimmering with superb silver-yellow reflections. I lost no time in letting him know my errand.

"Percy," I said, putting a hand gently on his shoulder, "I saw what you did tonight at the Casino."

"Really, Mr. Robert," he replied uncertainly, but looking at me intently, "you saw me do what?"

"I saw you lighten Mr. Randle's pocket," I replied tersely.

He sighed and bent his head. "Dear, dear," he said sadly, "I supposed it couldn't last for ever. But it has been so lovely here, Mr. Robert. And, now," he added firmly, "I suppose you want me to go with you to the police?"

"Not at all," I replied. "You will catch the Silver Eagle tomorrow morning at 11 a.m. and so get away from San Carolino at once—before the authorities get their hands on you."

Percy Jater did not reply for a moment and I feared he might give way to some sentimental outburst of gratitude, which would naturally have embarrassed me considerably. But no.

"Very well," he said simply, "I shall book my ticket first thing tomorrow morning."

"Good, and let us hope it is not too late."

There were many things I should have liked to ask him to assuage my curiosity, but I felt that explanations would be painful, so forbore. We shook hands outside the garden gate and said good-night to each other.

I couldn't help going to see him off at the station—feeling a little nervous lest some hawk-nosed "agent" should suddenly descend on us at the last moment and

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whip poor Percy away. But everything seemed to go well for us. As I stood chatting to him from the platform a sudden thought occurred to me.

"What about Mr. Randle's money?" I whispered through the carriage window. "I could probably arrange for it to be returned through a third party."

"I had thought of that, Mr. Robert," he replied. "Here it is," and he handed me out a thickish envelope. "Thirty thousand francs," he remarked casually. "A useful sum."

The guard came down slamming shut the doors and the train started to move.

Two minutes later the Silver Eagle was well on its way northwards.

Acting on a sudden impulse I opened up the envelope to see if there really was as much as thirty thousand francs inside. And, pulling out the contents, I found them to consist entirely of crinkly, new, highly coloured lottery tickets, valid for the June draw of the Municipality of San Carolino.

George Scott

A SNEER IS MORTAL

PEOPLE twist their faces when they sneer. They twist their souls, too. They squeeze the goodness in themselves into deformed little knots of pain and poison. They pour vinegar on the spark of loveliness which is in each of them.

My sneer was parentless. It proceeded from no bitterness, no hatred of the world, or of people, but from self-defence. But the parentless child begat its father and mother: cynicism and unreason.

Let me tell you about my sneer. I can write of it because it became as a living thing, self-willed and possessing a soul. It died some seven years ago, but it haunts me still.

To write of my sneer, I must write of myself, for in the beginning we were inseparable. I am the son of poor parents, both now dead. My father, a turner in a foundry, was killed at the works by a falling plate. I was then nineteen. My mother died two years later of cancer. I have never known any two people more kindly and more God-fearing than they. We lived in a black house in a black street, the house and street

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indistinguishable from fifty thousand other houses and five hundred other streets in that town. Our street had the single distinction of the black gasometer at the bottom of it. We rented the bottom part of the house; in the upper part lived a sloven-haired slattern with three bare-footed brats. You have read about our kind of life before, or have seen films which tried faithfully to reproduce it, but they failed because celluloid is, by nature, glossy. There was no bath, of course, but my father and mother were scrupulously clean, and the hip-bath was constantly in use in the kitchen. Cleanliness is next to godliness, they said, and they worshipped both. Even during the great disarmament slump in the iron and steel industry, we remained a clean and good house in the midst of depression and depravity. The dole was small help, and my father who fought in the 1914-18 war could not join his workmates pawning their gold watches and chains—brazen mementoes of the wartime boom.

I was a clever boy at school. And this is where I begin to talk about my sneer. Or rather, about sneers generally. I won a scholarship to the grammar school at the other end of town, where most of the boys were fee-payers. My mother kept me very clean, but she could not prevent me from looking shabby beside my more wealthy contemporaries. I know of no age when a human being is more addicted to violent snobbery than when he is at school. And my schoolfellows were no exception to this experience. Indeed, they were the first example and introduction to my knowledge of it. Had I been able to play games I might have placated their venom somewhat, but I was small, thin and weedy, with no taste for their boisterous pleasures. I was a friendly boy. My father had taught me to regard the blemishes of others and myself with charity, and to

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respect ideas which differed from my own. My father hated but one thing in the world: cynicism. And he taught me to hate it, too. "Always remember, lad, men may look up to God, but few see Him, and fewer still see in Him any likeness of themselves. The ashes of the Forbidden Fruit are always in our mouths, and we must never expect it to be otherwise in this world." He never talked to me as to a child, but as one man who had suffered to another who had yet to know the cruelty of the world.

I knew cruelty for the first time when I went to the grammar school. Oh, I had seen it in its more blatant forms before, but because it had been more obvious, I had seen it more as through a veil, half-seen, half-understood. Street fights, broken bottles, truncheons, screaming women, these were so much an integral part of my environment that they never found prominence for long in my thoughts. At the school I met a more subtle kind of cruelty, the cruelty of silent contempt. For, after the short period of active violence practised against me by my schoolfellows, came the almost unbearable daily torment of being voicelessly despised by them. All their faces became as one face. And that face was sneering at me. All my teachers except one were part of this face. To them, seeking patronage as they were, the shabby, weedy scholar was an object to be contemned, for their own well-being. I lost the friendship of the one man who offered his help to me, by betraying a misdemeanant to him. I deserved his withdrawal, for my action was a wilful explosion of spite against a boy whom I felt to be a ringleader in the maintenance of the barrier against me.

Only my parents were left to me. My father reproached me severely for my betrayal, but they did not desert me, thank God. They stood by me, scraping

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their tin money-box to keep me at school when the wages of an errand boy or a labourer would have meant security, and, perhaps, health for my mother. They taught me to withstand the cruelty and talked of the reward of good for evil. With their help I withstood the cruelty, but prayed for the day when I should be finished with school. I realise now, in retrospection, that I did not take all their teaching to heart, but began to cover myself with a protective skin. And within that skin was conceived the embryo sneer.

It was after I had left school, and after I had left home to work in a town fifty miles away that I felt the sneer developing and taking life. I thought that by leaving the town in which I had always lived, and where I was marked, I should escape the sneers and find a world as friendly disposed towards me as I was to it. But, in fact, by leaving home I left my last and strongest support—that of my parents. They were sad to see me go; my mother wept; but they did not try to stop me. My father talked to me for two hours on the night before I was to leave, reiterating and re-emphasising all the advice he had given me since I was a small boy. "Think kindly of humans, lad, and pity them more than you pity yourself."

But the world did not want my pity. They wanted nothing from me. They showed no knowledge of my existence and wished none. Oh, the loneliness of the bed-sitting-room, and my despair of the spindly-legged parsimonious landlady. She had no use for my pity, either. She wanted only two things from me—my rent and my good behaviour. She had no fear of either. Although my wages were small, and I sent weekly to my mother a few shillings, I spent little and paid my rent regularly. As for my good behaviour, at first I was thankful for the seclusion of my room and found an

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imaginative luxury and romance in settling down in the pregnant-sprunged old arm-chair before the gas-fire, straining my eyes over a book in the illumination of a forty-watt electric bulb. I began to put my fancies on to paper, too, identifying myself with the unhappy figures of literature, who strove against poverty, ill-health and deformity.

But there were times when the artificial blood of literature and the trailings of my own creations were unable to appease the lonely youth. I yearned for the company of a fellow human; to feel warmth, sympathy and tenderness in another's face. But the streets were full of people more intent on following the hurrying shadows cast by themselves on the pavement, and I was too inconspicuous to merit a second glance from those who might allow their eyes liberty to look about them.

At the office where I worked as a junior audit clerk I cannot say there was active hostility against me. But the very nature of the monotonous work drove the sympathies and emotions of my colleagues inward where they were caged during the day's work, to be released only when they were free of the bonds of ledgers, pass-books and trial balances. And then their thoughts were not for me. Away from the office, away from everything and everyone connected with it, away to a private life of which I had no knowledge other than that gained from a few discursory remarks passed before the day's work began. I had nothing to add to these conversations, and hence was never included in them. I did not blame them. I understood them as partitioned cells: one part living oblivious of the other which existed as an automaton.

Occasionally, when I could afford it, I would seek the secretive warmth of a cinema, but for me there were no "Angel Pavement" flirtations. Even in the darkness,

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in the atmosphere of smoke-hazed artificial love, I remained an object of disinterest.

I remember standing in the queue waiting for my tram to take me back to my lodgings after finishing work. It was winter and the shops were turning out their lights as they closed for the night. A few neon signs sent their colourful liquid flickerings into the dark sky, mingling with the sparks from the tramway wires overhead. Cars projected cones of light, and some pushed out orange flames in front of them as mist descended. The shelter in which I waited was but slightly lit, barely revealing the faces of those who stood within its shadow. I saw two places in front of me the back of a woman.

She wore a grey fur cape, and the light touched speckles of white in it, relieving the monotone. The owner turned round to gaze about her and caught my eyes upon her. She smiled for a moment, and turned away again. I apprehended no feature of her face, but a weakening thrill went piercing into my stomach. She had smiled at me. I continued to stare at her back, at her fur cape, her black hair, hoping that she might again turn around, and yet fearing that she should. She did not. A tram arrived, but it was not the one I was waiting for. People in front of me moved forward to board it, and I moved to fill their vacated places in the queue. The tram rattled away, and the frames of grubby light left us again. I ceased to follow it as it disappeared into the gloom and I turned to face the front of the queue. I looked at the back of the person in front of me. I was looking at grey fur again. The woman who had smiled at me. She was now so close that I could reach out a hand to touch her. I was about to do so, my engaged hand trembling as it held the small attaché case, when she turned around again. And she smiled

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again. My lips quivered in response, and my eyes could not face the dark ones that glistened the unspoken challenge. She held her smile for long, long seconds, and then once more turned her back upon me. She pulled her wrap more tightly about her, played with her hair, and then raised her right leg a little, ostensibly to examine her shoe. This drew my attention to the lower half of her dress. She was wearing a tight black skirt which threw out her hips, and outlined her thighs and buttocks. The memory of that youth, starved of words, and starved of fleshly excitement, trembling as though fever-sick, has never left me. Neither does it now seem foolish.

My train arrived, and I was glad and sorry to see it. I wanted to possess this terror a moment longer, just as lovers cling more tightly to chain ecstasy between their thighs when the blood falls from boiling-point. But this moment was prolonged and the blood given a second injection of excitement before the first had cooled in my veins. She turned and smiled at me once more before moving towards the tram. I followed, weak in the legs, allowing others to push in front of me before boarding the tram myself.

She was standing inside the tram, and Anticipation held her hands too tightly about my middle for me to bear the agony of standing next to her for the journey. I stood at the other end of the tram. I placed my case on the floor and held on to the backs of the seats in front of me with both my hands, to steady myself against the shaking of the tram and the shaking of my legs. I looked in her direction now and then to ascertain her presence, but afraid to meet her gaze. She did not look at me. I took this for a sign that her invitation had been voiced in that last look, a secret invitation which others were not to share. Through my near-

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delirium of the imagined sequence of events, I dimly heard the voice of the conductor calling out the names of the stops. She was still there. Then, at last, I heard the name of my stop called, and I saw her move forward to alight. My hands fumbled for the attaché-case and I pushed my way through the obstructing bodies to follow her, words of approach, culled from literature and the cinema, pumping their fire through my brain. I jumped from the tram, almost falling over with my burden which now assumed enormous weight and added to the complication of the imminent engagement.

The mist and the night air struck a welcome cool upon my face after the excited congestion of the tram. I reached the pavement and searched the gas-illuminated area for her. She was not in sight. With real panic I ran to and fro. She was not there. I stopped, panting breathlessly with pain of disappointment and frustrated anticipation. Then I heard footsteps receding in the distance, as the street and my breathing became quieter. I began running again in the direction from which the sounds seemed to come. They were louder now, as I stopped for a moment to check, and, at last, I caught up with them in a side street. They belonged to a man. He looked strangely at me, and quickened his pace, I laughed hysterically but silently, choking back the tearful convulsions.

I was sick before I went to bed that night, and as I cleared my stomach of the poison I realised the obvious truth. It had been a sneer, not a smile. As I have learned since, there are faces which smile their sneers, and this had been one of them. Reason took charge again and proved by evidence what I already knew to be true. I cursed myself for a fool to be so inflated by my imagination to believe that a woman over thirty,

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dressed as smartly as she was, could have had any interest in a shabby, sickly-faced youth. I needed many words from my father then, and his memory did not suffice.

It was not many many nights later that I ended my fast of loneliness by the only way I knew. I bought myself a woman, and in the act that brings men most near to God, received, unknown at the time, the poison of the world.

I was afraid of her, but felt no revulsion before, or remorse after. Perhaps I had bought her gift, but she had given it to me nevertheless. I had held warm, smelly, human flesh close to mine, and believed that it cleansed me. The fear I had felt was replaced by elation and relief as I walked home. Now the printed words might seem less artificial again; now my own words might be written in the ink of experience. I switched on the light, and looked about my barely-furnished room with a new pride of possession. I went to my dressing-table to view the new-born man in the mirror.

The reflection in the mirror sneered at me. The face had become as all those other faces which had been sneering at me. The sneer which had been concealed but unrecognised at school had been catapulted into birth by a single act, held sacred by God. All those gathering forces of bitterness which I called a "protective skin of self-defence", which I considered harmless, and subject to inculcate goodness and charity; flowered into flame.

I was transformed in a night. I returned sneer for sneer, bitterness for bitterness, "smile" for "smile". In the beginning I conceived a hatred for others and a new bubble love for myself. Charity began at home and never left my doorstep. I soon discovered there were

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plenty of women ready to take my body unto theirs, without money, without words, taking flesh for flesh. With each act the blood grew more cold, the hatred more bitter, and the sneer more deeply rooted. And then charity itself left my house and the disease walked in. I began to hate myself. No longer were there pleasures, no longer peace. There were lies, counterfeits, fairy-tales, but I believed not even them. The small piece of God within me had His own bitter revenge. I had starved Him of His own kind, and now He would not give me the relief of credence in the imitation.

This was my unhappy condition when I met Mary. Mary was the most lovely woman I have ever known or ever shall know. I should be prepared to believe her the especial incarnation of God's intervention in my affairs, if I believed any human being, least of all myself, worthy of God's personal aid.

She had black silken hair, like my first temptress, and her face was beautiful not merely by any accidental regularity of feature, but by the goodness which coloured every line. Her hands, her arms, her whole body, were as smooth as a polished wood carving, and as inviting to the touch. Yes, let blood flow through those grains of wood and perhaps one might see again the body of Mary. But, oh the warmth, the human warmth and tenderness of her! Only one artist could have given her that.

There was no overnight miracle healing. The sneers I reserved for Mary were the more venomous because I recognised in her all that I had forsaken, all that I had once loved, and had been exhorted to love. But she was stronger than I had been, and in her treatment of me she personified all the virtues my father had preached, and more. For she believed what my father nor I could

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ever believe: that Man was capable of attaining to Supreme Goodness. Even her goodness could not inspire me to that belief. But, very gradually, she did persuade me back along the path I had trodden so wantonly. Under her strong softness I felt the spark reviving in me again, expanding, pushing back the poison. But still the sneer remained and the devil fought hard to hold the soul which had seemed safely his.

We were walking on the moors once, watching the sun waving his hands and playing shadowgraphs on the breeze-ruffled fields. We lay down beside each other in the soft, yielding grass. I had known Mary for many months then, but, realising the poison which her good flesh might inflame, she had resisted all my advances, until they became less frequent, and my desires came once more under the government of reason and no longer that of lust. But she was so lovely as she lay there, her breasts, her sweet young breasts, rounded to incite the caress of my hand, rising and falling with her regular breathing, that, impulsively, I swung my head around to touch her lips with mine. She made no effort to resist me. There are creatures of flesh and blood and there is God. Heaven lies between.

Her lips parted slightly and her eyes held nippled tears as my arm reached over her.

Then the sun drew a dark hand quickly over his mouth to hide the sneer that quivered at the corner of his lips.

I fell back. Mary understood and touched my hand. The devil had played a subtle card at that moment, but he had played a wrong one. If he had not used the sun to taunt me, he might, without God to help us, have had both Mary and myself in his chain-gang. After that day I did not need Mary to tell me that we must join

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our souls before God before we joined our bodies.

We were married when she gave the word, when she thought that only the sneer on my face remained of the poison that had inhabited my soul. For myself, I believed, I knew, that with the consummation of our marriage the sneer would vanish from my face, just as it had appeared with my first illicit union.

If I had failed to describe the loveliness of Mary as I first knew her, how vain should be my efforts to tell of the loveliness of my virgin bride. How gently I laid my saviour on the marriage bed, how tenderly we exchanged our sacred caresses. Feel how the blood jumps in the veins of this butterfly-silk wood carving as my chastened hands give to her the excitements of my boundless love.

The act of consummation was no more than human. The strength even of our love could not prolong the seconds of man-made time we spent with God. But afterwards there was tenderness, relief, tired happiness, and perfumed sleep.

Awaking, I slid out of bed and stood before the mirror. Our faith, our months of restraint, had then their reward. No mark remained on my face of the poison. I saw there a reflection of her goodness.

Quietly I returned to the bed to look at my wife. The black silk of her hair lay across her beloved face. Gently I took the silk in my fingers that I might kiss her soft, moist lips. I unveiled the face of my flesh and blood statue.

I shall never know whether it was a smile or a sneer that I saw trembling then upon her lips.

Frederick Hurdis-Jones

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WHEN I came down from the University, I had to do something; in fact, it was because I was broke that I did come down. Colleges won't give the same length of credit as tailors, and to avoid unpleasantness I just left at the end of term, quietly, thus breaking my tradition of being thrown out, sooner or later, of every institution of which I have been part.

I knew quite well what I was going to do. I was going on the stage. It paid well, you didn't need references (always my worst headache) and I'd been a shining light of the O.U.D.S.—admittedly in wartime, when the competition was negligible, but still. . . . And the Ministry of Labour, I was told, treated actors as incorrigible, and left them, for the most part, alone. So I was going to be an actor.

After kicking around in London for three months, looking for work about once a week and living on the involuntary contributions of such unfortunate friends as were in when I called, I finally got a job with the Dorking Rep. At least, somebody else got me the job, in order to get me out of town. I have found that

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this, in an age of competition, is the only way of being sure of work; but that is quite by the way.

Barry Deedes, the producer at Dorking, was one of those modern "workers in the theatre" who talk continually of Humility, Significant Gesture and Stanislavsky, underpay their companies and behave at rehearsal like a Guards' drill-sergeant with *délusions de grandeur*. He had only met me for a moment in London, in an office hired for the afternoon, and had then seemed pleasant and rather shy; I had yet to see him as the cock of his own walk.

My first Monday morning read-through at Dorking showed what I was in for. The play was a costume comedy—even Barry couldn't give the locals Pirandello and Jean-Jacques Bernard every week—but, slight as it was, there was going to be no relaxation of the Stanislavsky stuff. His name had been piously breathed a good few times before my first entrance. When I finally came on and spoke my first line, nonchalantly, as one does at a reading, Barry let me have it. The Russian deity was evoked until the low roof of the hall rang with his name. What did I think I was doing? This wasn't the O.U.D.S. What was I doing in that suit? What would Stanislavsky have said to that suit, did I think? To this I replied that, if he weren't dead and had any taste at all, he would probably like it, as it was a very good suit and hadn't been paid for. For some reason this shut Barry up and on we staggered.

The rest of the morning was more or less a repetition of this scene, with the whole company coming up for punishment after each line anyone spoke. By the lunch-break I found I had two cigarettes left, and I had come into the theatre with three full packets of ten. It was with an indescribable relief that I gained the pub across the road.

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Leaning against the counter was Peter Langley, the leading man. He was a good-looking but rather callow young man, with waved blond hair and flat feet, but otherwise quite presentable. I went up to him and asked him what he'd have.

"Oh, thanks. I'll have a bitter," he said. I ordered two large whiskies.

"This your first job?" he asked.

"Of any kind. Why? Am I as bad as that?"

"On the contrary, I think you have great talent," he said in a patronising way. "It's only that when you've been on the stage a bit longer you'll realise you can't afford to drink whisky. Not on the salary Barry pays."

"I can't afford to now but I do all the same," I said. "By the way, does everyone in this company mind each other's business?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, you tell me what I ought to drink, and Deedes criticises my clothes, and so on. I'm afraid I'm not used to it."

"You're not annoyed with me?" He seemed really anxious to be friendly.

"Good God, no! You've a perfect right to drink beer if you like the stuff. All I meant was why this assumption that actors are any different from other people?"

"I don't know, really." He smiled. "Have one with me. Whisky?" I had a bitter. "Where did you train?" he asked.

"I didn't. I did a lot for the O.U.D.S. of course; but personally I don't think all this training business very important. All you need is a voice, presence, a memory, intelligence and experience. After all, Kean never went to the R.A.D.A."

"Don't know him myself. I trained with Fogerty, but

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I've been acting ever since I was a boy. I went to Westminster. Great acting school. Gielgud—he's an Old Boy, you know—used to come along and coach us."

"That's funny. You can't be much older than I am, and I was at Westminster, though I don't remember you. And not only that, but I was there five years, and as far as I know Gielgud never appeared." Got you there, my boy, I thought. That *was* a nasty one. But he didn't seem a bit put out.

"Of course, I mean Westminster *City* School; not *the* Westminster. Silly of me. Have another drink."

And so the lunch-break passed. I didn't catch him at it again, and anyway I didn't care if he *was* a liar. He was obviously a most useful person to know. Someone had to find me some digs—I could plead ignorance of the town—and Peter was the chosen stooge. He got me a decent room in his house, and before the day was done I had borrowed three quid from him with less trouble and in less time than it takes to tell it. A most useful young man.

The week wore on. I didn't see very much of Peter alone, as I was cultivating the rest of the company, seeing who was good for a touch or a lunch. And, besides, I didn't want anybody thinking that Langley and I were going to make a clique of two. In the evenings, while he was working, I stayed at home and learned my part, and I was usually in bed by the time he came in. On the Sunday morning he came into my room as I was shaving. "Going to town?" he asked.

"Yes. I've got a date for lunch, but I'll travel up with you if you like."

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"Thanks. I say, where d'you drink on Sunday mornings, by the way?"

"In the Ritz," I said grandly. It was true. Most of my friends went there on Sunday, and someone was sure to be good for a drink and even lunch.

"I prefer the bar at Claridge's; its quieter."

"Yes," I said. "Much quieter."

"I think I'll go and get ready. We can catch the 10.17."

"Oh, by the way, next time you go to Claridge's, give my regards to the barman. You may have a bit of a job finding him because Claridge's doesn't happen to have a bar."

"Silly of me," he said, with that smile so dear to the old ladies of Dorking, indulging their maternal instincts in the four-and-sixpennies. "I meant the Dorchester."

I thought there must be a catch in it when, one night in the following week, Barry Deedes asked me to have a drink with him after the show. When we got into the pub and he ordered large whiskies, I knew it. He wanted to talk about Peter.

"You share digs with him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Noticed anything funny about him?"

"No, I can't say I have, really." I wasn't going to discuss Peter, whom I quite liked, with this monster; at least, not for one large whisky I wasn't.

"Well, I'd better be frank. He's a pathological liar. Talks all sorts of nonsense about himself. I'm not a snob, of course, but it's a fact that his mother keeps a boarding-house in Pimlico. You can find it in the

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'phone book if you don't believe me. Elsie Fogerty knocked the King's English into him. You can't be too careful with a type like that. I only keep him in the company because he's so popular with the old trouts who come to matinees. Anyway, don't say I haven't warned you."

"I won't. Thanks for the information. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go home."

The inevitable crisis came about a fortnight later. Langley had been working up to something all the evening, I could see that. The fit was on him. When we got in from the pub he asked whether I wanted to go straight to bed.

"Well, I *was* going to. Why?"

"Can I come to your room and talk to you for a bit? Something I want to get off my chest."

We went to my room. The door was hardly shut before he began.

"I'm a bastard."

"Why? What have you done now?"

"Nothing. I mean I'm a *real* bastard. I'm the illegitimate son of the Marquess of Suffolk. I can live this lie no longer."

I remembered that last line. It came from a play we had done the week before. I let him go on.

"I can't stand this life any more. I'm going back to the old man, he's always been very decent to me. Sent me to Eton like all the other sons and gave me a room in the castle. God knows why I ever wanted to go on the stage. Thought it would be fun, I suppose, but I'm fed up. I wanted to justify myself, to get away from the shame of my birth." He was actually in tears.

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It was most moving. If only he had been able to act like that on-stage!

Very quietly, very deliberately, I let him have it. I, too, had had enough.

"Peter," I said.

He looked up from the sofa-cushion, his eyes red. "Yes?" he managed.

"Let us begin with the remarkable precocity of the Marquess of Suffolk, whom I was at Oxford with, and whom I used regularly to skin at poker. He must have conceived you at the age of about one. He hasn't a castle, but a rather small, although comfortable, flat in Mount Street. You may have been at Eton, and really I don't care: the only thing I do care about is the implied insult to my intelligence. This business has got, as far as I'm concerned, to stop. I don't give a damn what tripe you tell the others, but I'm sick to death of it. One more of your outrageous lies and I shall expose you publicly."

It worked. For the rest of the time he stayed with us I never heard another lie pass his lips. He took to doing my shopping for me, used to hear me my lines, and lent me sums amounting to about thirty pounds. Every Friday, when we got paid, he took me to lunch at the best hotel in Dorking. It had worked all right.

Only once more did I have any trouble with him. One night I went into the bathroom to find him sitting on the edge of the bath, moaning, his hand to his side. "I'm having a heart attack," he told me. I had heard a good deal about these heart attacks in his unregenerate days, so I merely said, "I'm having twins. The curtain

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goes up in half an hour. Come to my room and watch.”
With that I left him.

The next morning he brought me a cup of tea in bed. “I’m sorry about last night,” he said. “Let’s forget it,” I suggested. There were no more heart attacks after that, but the tea in bed, I was pleased to notice, became a regular institution. In fact, I regretted having been so firm. Perhaps had I let him go on a bit longer he would have cleaned my shoes as well.

About a month later, Peter and the second juvenile, a boy called Tommy, got an engagement together in the North. On their last night they gave a party in the pub, and I got a chance to take Peter aside.

“You’re going to share digs with Tommy, I believe?”
“Yes, why?”

“Only that I’ve told him about Lord Suffolk and Eton and the heart attacks. I’m sorry, but I thought it was better for his nerves. Barry said something to him, apparently, and he asked me about you, so I told him. It seems you’ve tried most of it out on him before, except the angina pectoris.” I didn’t add that it had cost Tommy about half a bottle of whisky to solicit this seemingly altruistic warning.

They left that night for London, and that was the last I saw of Peter Langley. I missed him. It was a bore to have to do my own shopping; and, most of all, I regretted the morning tea.

A year later I had reached the West End. As an understudy in the sort of play that is all about the

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domestic troubles of the people next door. I didn't care, as they paid me twelve quid a week and for the nine months it ran I never saw the stage. Money for jam. One morning I was in the Express Dairy opposite the Arts when in came a girl called Connie who had been at Dorking with me. She made for me at once:

“Darling,” she gushed, “it's too awful.”

“What is?”

“I've had a letter from Tommy. Poor Peter's dead.”

“What?”

“Yes. Heart attack or something. They shared digs, you know, and Peter was taken queer one night, and Tommy thought he was codding and threw a glass of water over him and the next thing he knew Peter was stretched out stiff on the floor, dead as a door-nail. Tommy had to go to the inquest, of course, and the Coroner gave him a very rough time and I should hope so, too. Damn silly thing to do. It's too awful, though, don't you think?”

“Yes. I killed him.”

“What?”

But I didn't hear and walked out, leaving Connie to pay. I wanted a stiff drink. As I made my way towards the Salisbury, blinking in the strong sunshine, I bought the midday *Star* and tried to remember the name of the animal the stage-manager had said was a certain thing for the two-thirty at Stockton.